天地無用！魎皇鬼

諸行無常編（上）

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富士見ファンタジア文庫

Tenchi Muyo! Ryo-Ohki

The Impermanence of All Things (Part 1)

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Novel 1

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Prologue: How It All Began

In the beginning, everything started from a mere whim of one of the three goddesses.

Within the vastness of space, there were only atoms undergoing nuclear fission and those that were not—in other words, clusters of stars and dust. Beyond that, there was nothing. The general consensus was that space was certainly not teeming with life. Of course, there were always exceptions. However, for an exception among exceptions to find another was a daunting task. One might think they saw a UFO, or feel that a cosmic entity was speaking to them through channeling, but it was safe to say that an alien—especially a beautiful woman of prime age—would almost never go out of her way to visit. Yes, unless it was a movie or a novel.

The reason "never" wasn't used in an absolute sense was because there were things in this world beyond human understanding. For example... it can be said like this:

> "In this universe, there are three goddesses who protect us from evil beings. One presides over knowledge, one over power, and the other over love. The names of the three are..."

At this point, some might have recalled the names of the three goddesses from Norse mythology. That, too, was one answer. However, if you were the only person on this Earth who knew the truth. Indeed, who could possibly say that it was not the truth?

Truth was always with love. And as long as there was love, this story was the truth. Logical contradictions were asked to take a short vacation.

Now, the origin of this tale of love and truth traced back roughly ten thousand years.

Ten thousand years ago today, the universe was right there. Three young spirits, who had just arrived in this dimension under orders of a new

assignment, were gazing at the piercingly blue sky beneath a massive tree on the planet Jurai, their designated coordinate point.

"Ahhh, I’m bored," a girl muttered while sprawled out ungracefully, staring at the sunlight filtering through the leaves. Looking at her head, which resembled a flashy pink *Kagamishishi* lion mask, it was hard to believe she was a spirit sent to protect the universe.

"Now, Washu. You’re so impatient. We only just got here," replied a girl with flowing light-blue hair tied back in a single ponytail, dressed in loose-fitting robes. A third girl, with a glowing jewel set in her forehead, watched the two of them with a smile.

"Tsunami. You’re lucky you can be happy anywhere." Washu rolled onto her stomach, reached out toward a purple flower, and began to fiddle with it.

"Happy? Is there ever a time when we aren't happy? This planet is beautiful. It’s like a garden in the heavens. Father must have prepared it for us." Tsunami opened her clear, beautiful eyes and gently touched the bark of the great tree.

"Don't be startled. We are spirits. I want to talk with you. Please tell me your name." Tsunami closed her eyes as if snuggling against the giant tree, trying to catch its voice. Suddenly, the leaves trembled, and countless threads of light rained down upon the three of them.

"Ah..." Tsunami let out a small cry. The golden rain was a flow of infinite information. It showed how this planet was born 4.5 billion years ago, the various eras it passed through leading to their own arrival, and what kind of creatures lived there besides their own race.

"Genetic information. Now this is interesting. That makes things quick," Washu said. Showered in the overflowing information, she seemed to have completely forgotten her previous boredom. "Interesting. To think a plant-based lifeform has such a high level of consciousness."

"Shh. Wait," Tsunami cautioned. "This tree is trying to communicate something. It wants something."

"Something?" Washu sat up and tilted her head.

"Friends... things that can move. Small lives. He cannot leave this planet as he is. He wants someone who understands him, a friend. And that... is on a blue

planet far away. A sibling planet born at the same time as this one. That planet is now nurturing many lives..."

Tsunami continued to speak as if dreaming, while Washu stayed propped up on one elbow, listening to the history of that blue star. It was the story of a small, peripheral planet born roughly 4.6 billion years ago, which had become filled with water and tiny lives.

"Alright, I get it!!"

Washu suddenly leaped up, surprising Tsunami so much that she stopped talking and moved away from the tree.

"So, we just have to go there and snatch up a few samples, right?" Excitedly pacing around, Washu began to speak fluently about the plan she had just formed. She detailed how to fashion this highly conscious tree into the core of a ship, and what information to add so the tree could take the form of a vessel and cross the sea of stars.

"It’s a simple thing. Right, Tsunami? You agree, don't you?"

"Washu. To say you'll 'snatch them up'... doing such a thing would disturb the history of the universe." Tsunami knit her brows anxiously.

"You're such a worrywart. If it doesn't work out, we can just put them back. Unlike you, it’s just not in my nature to sit quietly and watch over the peace of the universe. If I did that, I’d go crazy from boredom. It’s fine. It’s not like I’m doing anything bad. Right, Tokimi?"

Addressed by Washu, Tokimi stood up with a smile and looked up at the sky as if lost in thought.

"In the distant future... a pilot for the ship... one who inherits our will will be born. Though that person's form cannot be seen yet... they will become deeply involved with our destiny..."

Washu peered into Tokimi's mysterious green eyes, trying to probe her heart, before giving up with a small shrug of her shoulders.

"There she goes again. Even though we’re sisters, she never explains anything. Hey, Tsunami. What’s the name of that sibling planet? Where are the coordinates?"

"Wait." Tsunami pressed her cheek against the great tree and closed her eyes. "Earth... a planet on the periphery, filled with blue water..."

"Earth, huh..." Washu whispered excitedly. With this, it looked like she wouldn't be bored for a while.

One week later, the first ship, the *Tsunami*, was completed.

The three goddesses boarded the ship with beautiful wings and set out across the sea of stars in search of the distant sibling planet.

Chapter 1:
The Infinite, Expanding Universe...

The infinite, expanding universe...

Standing here within the precincts of Masaki Shrine, located in a small village in Okayama, those clichéd words somehow felt remarkably real.

"Mmm... the stars are beautiful. It would have been even better if there were a girl next to me, though."

Tenchi Masaki, a first-year student at Okayama Prefectural Kurashiki Nishi Technical High School, muttered in a somewhat pathetic tone while looking up at the star-filled sky.

It was the night of the first day of summer vacation.

Tenchi had come to Masaki Shrine, where his grandfather lived, carrying a mountain of homework and a heart that felt ready to sink at any moment.

"Sigh... Back to the daily grind of live-in training and helping with housework..."

Tenchi let out a deep sigh.

Tenchi had lived here as a child. It was a family of four: his mother, Achika; his father, Nobuyuki; and his grandfather, Katsuhito. This life had continued until Tenchi became a junior high student and his father opened an architectural design office in Kurashiki City. It was from the summer of his first year in junior high that he began returning to his grandfather’s place every summer vacation to spend the forty-odd days until the new semester began.

Masaki Shrine was said to have been established seven hundred years ago, but despite that, it was always deserted; there were no festivals, and people didn't even visit during the New Year holidays. Tenchi had assumed it was simply because it was such a small shrine deep in the mountains, but recently, he had begun to notice that there seemed to be a different reason altogether.

"I guess that’s it... 'Let sleeping gods lie'..."

Tenchi stood up from the veranda and looked toward the sacred tree.

In the dark waters of a large pond, there was a small island reachable by stepping stones, where the sacred tree—said to be seven hundred years old—stood quietly. And further up the mountain path from the pond, there was a small shrine that supposedly sealed away an ogre seven hundred years ago.

Before he knew it, Tenchi’s mind began to trace back to his childhood memories.

> "That ogre could leap over three mountains in a single bound, and its strength was such that a single blow could change the shape of a massive mountain. It ravaged villages, burnt fields to ash, and the people suffered greatly under its evil power. They say the ogre had three eyes, and those eyes were the source of its strength. But then, as if chasing the ogre, a ship in the shape of a dragon descended from the sky. A single samurai was aboard that ship, and that man wielded a sword imbued with great spiritual power, finally striking the ogre down. The samurai sealed the ogre inside a shrine and firmly enchanted the door. He then built a small hermitage near the shrine to keep watch so that the ogre would never wake. That eventually became Masaki Shrine, and we are the descendants of that samurai..."

As a kid, I used to beg Granddad to tell me that story over and over...

In those stories, the ogre sometimes grew four arms, kidnapped village girls to do this or that (the latter being Tenchi's later creative additions), or swallowed all the water in the pond in one gulp, but the "three eyes as the source of power" part never changed.

Tenchi often tried to sneak into the sealed shrine, only to be scolded by his grandfather. However, since the entrance was fitted with iron bars and a sturdy lock—and Tenchi didn't know where the key was kept—there was nothing more he could have done anyway.

As Tenchi slowly walked down toward the pond with the sacred tree, he remained lost in his childhood memories.

He recalled the story that the "Divine Sword" used in the legend was enshrined within that small building. It was a magnificent blade that could cleave through rock, with three jewels embedded in its hilt that supposedly glowed like fire whenever the sword was swung. In young Tenchi's imagination, the samurai looked like the TV heroes popular at the time, coolly defeating a three-eyed, giant monster-like ogre.

Tenchi remembered this and found it amusing.

"Well, I was just a brat back then..."

If it were now... yeah, the Divine Sword would be like Excalibur... or maybe like some legendary sword from a game... and the ogre would be like a final boss that you couldn't stand a chance against unless you were a hero who descended from the heavens. With my current skills, it'd be impossible...

Tenchi realized he was thinking about something foolish and gave an involuntary wry smile.

No matter what anyone said, it was a seven-hundred-year-old legend. In this day and age, it was crazy to think that ogres or legendary swords actually existed.

Tenchi turned his thoughts toward his immediate troubles.

Despite being nearly fifteen, he still didn't have a single girlfriend—a fairly dire problem for him.

"I guess it's because I'm so reserved... and I don't know how to act around girls..."

The moon in the night sky seemed to deepen his sense of loneliness.

Since his mother, Achika, passed away when he was five, no woman had entered the Masaki household. His father, Nobuyuki, never took a second wife. Tenchi was essentially raised by his grandfather and father.

"If only Mom were still alive..."

The mother in Tenchi’s memory remained forever young and beautiful. She was always in a kimono, and he felt as though he had never even seen her feet. He still remembered her standing by the sacred tree in a wisteria-colored kimono with her hair up.

The summer light—no, a shower of light—danced on the water's surface, and for some reason, his mother’s figure took on a radiance that seemed out of this world. For a moment, his voice caught in his throat as he tried to call out to her, but when she turned around, she was already his usual, gentle mother.

What was that all about...?

The rustling of leaves snapped Tenchi back to reality.

"Mom..."

Tenchi forcibly shook off the shadows of reminiscence.

It was always like this. Whenever he returned here and stared at the dark water, he would find himself remembering his mother before he knew it.

"Did Mom become a star...? Did she go back to the 'Garden in the Heavens' she used to tell me about...?"

Tenchi looked up at the night sky, feeling unusually sentimental.

"Mom. I'm fifteen now. Starting tomorrow, it's back to daily training. Granddad calls it 'Masaki-style swordsmanship,' but I don't really know what I'm practicing for. It's not like there are any tournaments, and I still can't beat Granddad. But, if it was your wish for me to get strong enough to defeat him..."

At that moment, something crossed the night sky.

"Ah..."

A shooting star emitted a brief, intense flash of light, seemed to fall toward the sealed shrine, and vanished before he could even process it.

"A shooting star..."

To Tenchi, it looked as though the shooting star had been sucked right into the shrine.

"The shrine...? Oh, crap!"

I was supposed to make a wish. Is it too late now...?

Tenchi solemnly clapped his hands and offered a prayer.

"God. Please let me get a cute girlfriend. If possible, one with a good personality, a great figure, and as beautiful as my mom."

Tenchi looked up at the night sky again, exasperated by his own convenient wish but still half-seriously expecting something. Right then...

"Uugh...?"

Feeling an unidentifiable chill, Tenchi whipped around. Only the silently stilled main hall was visible in the distance.

"I guess selfish wishes like that are bad luck, huh?"

Seized by an uncomfortable feeling, Tenchi began to walk away at a quick pace. However, the brilliance of that shooting star, which looked as if it were absorbed by the shrine, remained burned into his mind until he fell asleep.

The next morning.

Woken up early and pushed through a rapid succession of cleaning the main hall, preparing meals, morning practice, and farm work, Tenchi had no time to remember the previous night. His evenings were dedicated to study time, and as a reward for a healthy day, he was already sleepy by nine o’clock.

During all this, if one were to ask what Granddad was doing, he wasn't doing anything worth mentioning. However, whenever Tenchi slacked off, he would appear behind him out of nowhere, and a sharp strike from a bamboo sword would descend.

Tenchi was used to this and was rarely hit, but he still couldn't understand how Granddad managed to sneak up behind someone without leaving the slightest trace of his presence.

Three summers ago, Tenchi had asked him once: "How do you know when I'm slacking off?"

Granddad had laughed—*ho, ho, ho*—and replied:

> "Tenchi. Everything is training. Haven't you reached the point where you can dodge my strikes? If you're frustrated, try sneaking up behind me for a change."

That summer, Tenchi tried to get behind his grandfather many times, but he never succeeded once.

"I guess I'll just never have enough training," Tenchi had thought, and out of sheer frustration, he once packed his bags and went back to his house in Kurashiki. He spent the remaining two weeks of that summer at home, but he felt listless. In the end, he didn't really go out to play or do much studying, and his precious summer vacation ended while he just idled about. Granddad never contacted him.

At that time, Tenchi realized something. Training was tough (as was the housework), but being made a fool of by Granddad was even harder to stomach. He decided he would stick it out until he could at least get one hit on the old man.

The following summer vacation, Tenchi finally landed a hit on Granddad for the first time. To be precise, it wasn't a clean hit, and luck played a fifty-percent role, but even so, Tenchi had broken through Granddad's ironclad defense.

Granddad, with an unruffled expression, rubbed his arm and said only one thing:

> "Tenchi. You've certainly grown taller."

Tenchi was so happy he couldn't say anything; he just nodded with a wide grin. That was the summer vacation of his final year in junior high.

Ever since then, Tenchi had willingly put up with the early mornings, the grueling practice, the cleaning, the laundry, and the chores. This year, Tenchi had grown even taller. He surely had more strength than last year. Maybe, just maybe, this was the year he would finally defeat Granddad.

The first half of the summer vacation—healthier than that of a local elementary schooler, waking at five and sleeping at nine—passed by like this.

However, a human being—especially a fifteen-year-old boy—cannot spend every day being so virtuous indefinitely. The day finally arrived for Tenchi when "mischief" crept in—an everyday air pocket, a winning lottery ticket of fate.

Yes, it was... Tenchi still thinks this today... that Granddad intentionally provoked him (after all, thinking about it, it was unnatural that the keys could be swiped so easily) to break the seal on the shrine... In short, Tenchi got his hands on the keys to the shrine.

Meanwhile.

Within a space where time seemed to have stopped, there was an entity that remained awake, gorging on its own loneliness. This was the sanctuary deeper still than the shrine that had sealed away seven hundred years.

This entity, which looked like an unnaturally shaped, gaunt mummy, was waiting for the fated hour while releasing pale, glowing spheres of light like fireflies. The firefly-like spheres were the entity's consciousness—or rather, its terminals.

The light spheres flew about in a chaotic swarm, gradually increasing in number, until they formed a faint human shape directly above the grotesque entity half-submerged in a water basin. The humanoid shape, lying supine while floating in mid-air, became denser until its details were clearly visible.

It was the figure of a young woman. The contours of her face, with eyes closed, slowly emerged. She could even be called beautiful. Her almond-shaped eyes were still tightly shut, and long eyelashes cast shadows on her cheeks. Her nose was sharp and prominent, and her thin lips were set in a firm line. Overall, the clear outlines—as if carved with a chisel—and the slender yet supple and powerful limbs seemed to reveal the true nature of this being.

It was a warrior’s form—no, a form created for battle.

By now, though she was translucent, her form had become so refined that one might expect to feel a cold, glass-like sensation if they touched her. The

fingertips of this being in the shape of a young woman curled back sharply. Then, her tightly closed eyes opened slightly, as if sensing an omen.

A golden light leaked into the sanctuary filled with pale phosphorescence. Then, she snapped her eyes wide open.

Golden eyes.

Perhaps you have seen a *Hannya* mask? The area around the circular pupils is painted with gold leaf. That is the color of the underworld, representing a being not of this world—a sign that the dweller belongs to a different realm.

She slowly rose and drifted over the multiple layers of waterways that surrounded the basin like a mortar, before suddenly vanishing. Behind her, only the mummy-like main body remained, and the surface of the water rippled slightly.

"Tenchi..."

A faint whisper, like an auditory hallucination, broke the silence and vanished just as quickly.

She appeared outside the shrine, atop a rocky grotto, and with her golden eyes, she looked longingly at the dark main hall of Masaki Shrine, shaded by the grove of the sanctuary.

"I've been waiting for you... Tenchi... Tenchi..."

On a day when a little over ten days of summer vacation remained.

Tenchi was sprinting up the mountain path toward the shrine, clutching the ring of keys he had luckily swiped from Granddad's robe.

The key to open that forbidden door. The key to uncover the unopened shrine. A sacred place where no one had set foot for seven hundred years—he would finally be able to see the Holy Divine Sword with his own eyes!

Thinking about it, he simply couldn't bring himself to walk.

Creeeeeak...

The rusted door let out a resentful sound as it opened.

Deep within a gloomy passage that felt as if it led to the land of the dead, there was a small burial chamber. The air inside was chilly and heavy, wrapped in a silence so profound he could hear his own breathing. And at the back of the chamber sat a single, small altar.

Tenchi shivered involuntarily, not just because the sweat had dried on his skin, but because of a strange, eerie chill.

"I hate this... this kind of atmosphere... It's like a Japanese horror movie or something..."

Man... if this were a Daijiro Morohoshi manga, a monster would definitely be next. Like, the moment the sword is pulled, the sealed demon comes out...

Tenchi placed his hand on the hilt of the Divine Sword enshrined on the altar, steeled his nerves, and pulled with all his might.

Nothing came out.

To make matters worse, the sword he had gone through so much trouble to pull out was rusted and falling apart.

"What is this...?"

All the tension left him at once. For someone who had waited ten years for this day, it was a pathetic development.

"Granddad, talking so big. If the Divine Sword is like this, that ogre story must be a load of crap too... Well, I guess this is it."

It happened when he absent-mindedly swung the rusted sword down onto a rock right at his feet. The rock split wide open, and at the same moment, a terrifying rumbling of the earth occurred.

"Waaaagh!"

In that instant, three things flashed through Tenchi’s mind:

1. It’s here! An ogre? A monster?
2. No way, am I getting buried alive in a cave-in?

3. I don't care which it is, just save me!

The answer Tenchi saw was none of the above. As the vibrations subsided, he saw a crack in the monolith behind the altar, just wide enough for a person to squeeze through.

"No way... a passage?"

Tenchi gripped the hilt of the broken Divine Sword and fearfully took a fated step forward. Right then...

"Tenchiiii..."

Before he could even think that a faint cry of joy had brushed his ear, Tenchi went sliding headfirst into the bottomless abyss.

What happened after that is something one could not talk about while sane.

At the bottom of the abyss, someone really *was* waiting.

Was it an ogre... a mummy... a monster resurrected from the underworld...?

It had certainly been waiting for Tenchi.

Deep in the strangely modern sanctuary filled with pale phosphorescence, it grabbed Tenchi’s arm, stroked his cheek affectionately, and tried to pull him close...

He didn't want to remember that part anymore.

Those golden eyes were closing in.

I... I don't want to die yet!

Then, that heartbreakingly sweet voice echoed directly into his mind.

"Tenchiiii... Tenchiiii..."

Chapter 2:

The Sound of a Bell Was Heard

The sound of a bell was heard.

Ah, is that Granddad's cat, Chibi? A bell for the cat. I hope grandad remembered to feed them. Wait, what?

Tenchi woke up with a jolt. The night wind was cold. For a split second, he had mistakenly thought he was still at his grandfather's place. Remembering that he had skipped class and fallen asleep, Tenchi stood up while rubbing his aching lower back. It was now September. He was on the roof of the school building.

"I had a nasty dream..."

Perhaps because of the dream, his head was still throbbing. *That's what I get for sleeping in a place like this,* Tenchi thought.

Well, it doesn't matter anymore, right?

Tenchi thought in the back of his mind while searching for an excuse for his late return home. In any case, that crack in the rock had sealed up, he had locked the shrine door just as it was before, and he had tossed the keys back into the drawer of Granddad's desk. Even when Tenchi told him he was going back home early, Granddad hadn't said a word, and he hadn't heard anything from him since.

In other words, nothing had happened. That really might have been a dream after all. That's right. An ogre in a shrine? And a living mummy at that...?

At that moment, the sound of the bell rang out again. Tenchi gasped, his feet freezing to the spot.

The sound of a bell? Who... is it?!

As if answering that thought, a cool, clear voice echoed.

"Ryoko. That is... my name..."

At the end of his gaze as he spun around, someone was sitting atop the water tower. It was a woman. A young woman. If the situation had been different, he surely would have thought she was beautiful. Wearing an unusual outfit, the woman crossed her legs with a naturalness that suggested she was sitting in a chair, and then she opened her eyes.

A golden light leaked out.

"Ah...!"

An ogre. Reflexively, the nightmare from before—the terrifying sight he had seen inside the shrine during summer vacation—came rushing back.

"No way... no way..."

The monster from back then!

As if reading his mind, pale spheres of light burst reproachfully around Tenchi.

"It was dark and cold in there... You cannot possibly understand the suffering I endured during those seven hundred years since I was sealed in that grotto..."

The woman turned her piercing golden eyes toward him. Immediately afterward, a blade of light flashed inches away from Tenchi.

After that, the situation was no longer one for leisurely explanations. The woman pursued. Tenchi fled. Like a cat toying with a mouse, the woman chased Tenchi relentlessly.

Why?! How?! Tenchi screamed inside his mind. *Why do I have to go through this?!*

"That's because, Tenchi, you were the one who woke me up."

The woman's voice echoed directly in Tenchi’s mind.

"Woke you up? I didn't mean to wake you..."

"You're saying you didn't? Then what exactly have I been doing, waiting for seven hundred years? Why didn't you give me at least one kiss?"

"A k... kiss?!"

Tenchi was out of breath and felt dizzy. He didn't understand what she was saying at all. Why would he have to kiss a mummy? What on earth was this person?

"I'm not a mummy!!"

A response like a shockwave.

"Have you forgotten about me? We've been together ever since you were this little. Ever since you were being carried on your mother's back, I've watched only you and thought only of you... Tenchi. Can't you sense me? You used to be able to. You used to stare at me with such a curious look on your face. I thought you could see me. Even if you couldn't, I thought you knew I was there. Isn't that why you broke the seal? If you tell me you've forgotten, I'll cut you down with this!"

"Wai—Wait a minute!" the cornered Tenchi shouted. "Ryoko? Are you really the ogre from the shrine? The legend? I... I..."

The woman—no, Ryoko's expression brightened.

"You remembered?"

"Well... sort of..."

"It's Ryoko."

"Yeah... um..."

"Ryoko."

While still holding the pale, glowing sword, Ryoko smiled broadly. It was a nightmarish sight.

"It's fine, as long as you remember."

"No, well..." Tenchi was at a loss for words. "...I don't remember."

"WHAT DID YOU SAY?!"

Ryoko’s hair stood on end.

"You're saying... you don't remember me? After I... after I..."

The sword sparked in Ryoko’s hand.

There was no need to record the grand struggle that followed, which left Okayama Prefectural Kurashiki Nishi Technical High School half-destroyed. However, it is necessary to mention how Tenchi escaped the clutches of this demoness.

What saved Tenchi was the Divine Sword he had taken from the shrine—or more accurately, the hilt of the Divine Sword. It descended through the air, glowing like a magic blade, and fit perfectly into the hand of the startled Tenchi.

"Ah, the Tenchi-ken..."

Ryoko’s murmur and the sword dragging Tenchi along like a war god to slash at her happened almost simultaneously.

"That's cheating, Tenchi! That was originally my..."

Tenchi’s sword flashed, slicing off Ryoko’s wrist along with the gems.

"Ah..."

What have I done?

While Tenchi stood speechless, Ryoko let out a sigh and looked at him resentfully.

"Oh, well. I lost again. To think that I, the space pirate Ryoko, would lose in such a pathetic way..."

"S-Space pirate?"

"Well, we can talk about the details later. More importantly, should you really be staying here?"

When Tenchi instinctively looked back, the school building, burning bright red against the night sky—perhaps as an aftermath of a gas explosion—leaped into view.

"Crap. Anyway, I've gotta get out of here..."

When he looked around, Ryoko had vanished. He could even hear the sirens of fire trucks, though he didn't know who had reported it. Tenchi decided to flee, no matter what.

Having made it back home in a state of utter wretchedness, Tenchi crept inside, sat down exhaustedly on his bed in his second-floor room, and stared at the hilt of the Divine Sword.

That girl... did she say her name was Ryoko? She said she'd been waiting seven hundred years for me, but does she really know me...? And she called this the Tenchi-ken. This sword... has the same name as me? What is going on?

With a confused mind, Tenchi tried to trace back his childhood memories. At the edge of his recollection, a ghost-like presence began to rise.

That was... when Mom died...

Yes, it was snowing, wasn't it? I was crying at Mom's grave. No matter how much I cried, the tears wouldn't stop. Even though my chest felt empty, the tears kept falling. Maybe I cried a lifetime's worth of tears back then. Yes, it was that time.

Tenchi snapped his head up. Someone was there. Or rather, he felt like someone was there. That's right—the snow... the snow piling up on Mom's grave didn't fall on me. It was as if someone were crouching behind me.

"Mom?"

His own young voice revived in Tenchi's mind.

"Mom? Are you there? It's me. Say something."

That was it. That's right. He had definitely seen it. Through a pale silhouette, the snow... quietly falling on the other side of that person whose face he couldn't quite see.

Oh, why had I forgotten until now? No, I remembered perfectly. I just didn't want to remember, so I locked it away... sealed it at the very bottom of the drawer of my memories... Mom!

Tenchi covered his face with both hands.

I can't. I shouldn't remember. It took me ten years to finally be able to bear the fact that Mom isn't anywhere in this world anymore. I'll go back to being who I was then. The five-year-old me who didn't know what else to do but cry when Mom was gone...

At that moment, he heard a voice like a sigh. Tenchi's heart nearly stopped for a second.

"W-Who is it?"

Someone was there. And very close by, too. *It couldn't be...*

Tenchi threw back the covers. Then, he was speechless.

"Ryoko...!!"

"Why are you here?!"

Ryoko stretched comfortably, opened her golden eyes, and smiled at him.

"Welcome home, Tenchi."

In that instant, the world turned pure white.

Chapter 3:

"Hey?"

"Hey?"

There was no reply. Tenchi remained frozen in place, staring into space with his hands pressed together.

"Hey, why are you clapping your hands?"

Suddenly, Tenchi snapped back to his senses and leaped away.

"The girl from before! You... how...?"

Ryoko looked at Tenchi's twitching face, smiled broadly, and lifted the edge of the blanket.

"Now that you've come this far, I'll tell you everything."

"I-I-I-Idiot! What are you saying all of a sudden? Besides, that's my bed!"

"Is it so bad for me to be here?"

Ryoko didn't seem offended; nonetheless, she sat up on the bed and stared intently at Tenchi.

The sheer absurdity of the situation started to make Tenchi feel sick. It was true that he had made a wish upon a shooting star. He had asked for a girlfriend. From that perspective, a situation where a girl was in his bed—and beckoning him, no less—was more than he had asked for. However, he hadn't said *anyone* would do. He certainly never said an ogre or a monster would be fine.

"Hey... please."

Ryoko's eyes grew moist, and stars seemed to appear within them.

"You don't want to waste a chance encounter like this, do you?"

As she leaned forward, the front of Ryoko’s kimono maintained a precarious sense of modesty. It seemed to be whispering to Tenchi:

Look, come closer. Don't you want to see more? It’s alright, we’ll gladly give up our place for you...

Tenchi drifted toward the bed. He felt like a spectator as Ryoko’s hand pulled him in and began to fumble with his chest. That is, until he saw Ryoko’s hand reach toward his pants pocket.

The sword!

Tenchi realized her intent abruptly and tried to brush her hand away in a panic. Ryoko was a fraction of a second faster.

"Got it!"

Ryoko shouted triumphantly and gripped the hilt of the sword—but the three jewels remained silent. She tried to transfer the energy sealed within them into her own wrist. Instantly, the sword emitted a flash of light, and Ryoko let out a cry of pain, dropping the sword as if she had been burned.

"W-What happened?"

Tenchi quickly scooped up the sword while glancing between the blade on the floor and Ryoko, who was now sitting sideways, clutching her hand.

"You... you can't touch it?"

Still sitting miserably, Ryoko looked up at Tenchi with tears glistening in her eyes.

"Give it back... without that, I can't use my power. I can't even call Ryo-Ohki."

"Ryo-Ohki...?"

Though he didn't know her true identity, Tenchi felt his resolve wavering at the fact that he was making a girl cry. He remained standing, cautious.

"Look... I have no idea what’s going on. Are you really the ogre from the shrine? Why did you come out? What do you want from me? And this sword... you called it the Tenchi-ken. If I give it back, what do you plan to do?"

A single tear rolled down Ryoko’s cheek. At that moment, she looked completely harmless; in fact, she seemed on the verge of collapsing from the shock of Tenchi’s rejection. She hung her head and whispered.

"An enemy..."

"What?"

He had to lean down to hear her.

"A terrifying enemy is approaching... Ah!"

Ryoko suddenly clung to Tenchi.

"A demon! No, a demon might actually be better. Anyway, this person is cold as ice, won't listen to reason, and thinks they’re the greatest thing in the universe. Tenchi, do you want to meet someone like that?"

Dumbfounded, Tenchi stared back at Ryoko’s face, which now looked like a different person's entirely.

"So, you call this Ryo-Ohki thing... and do what? Fight?"

Ignoring a voice in his heart that screamed *Something is wrong, this isn't how things were supposed to go*, Tenchi asked his question.

"I need the energy from the jewels to call Ryo-Ohki," Ryoko said.

"The jewels..."

Tenchi suddenly realized the truth. *Damn it, I almost got tricked*. She had been after the sword's jewels from the very start. Suddenly, the legendary ogre of his imagination revived, and with it, a vision of his house being trampled and himself fleeing in terror flashed through his mind.

Tenchi roughly shook off Ryoko’s hand.

"That's stupid! Do you think I'd believe that? Enemies? Demons? What are you talking about? There's nothing like that anywhere—"

It was then.

A young woman's voice, amplified enough to nearly burst through the ceiling, rained down upon them.

"Ryoko-san! Come out this instant! I know you are in there! You cannot run any longer!!"

...*longer... longer... longer...*

Listening to the strangely surreal echo, Tenchi felt his mind go blank again and stood there, dazed. Suddenly, his shoulder was grabbed roughly, snapping him back to reality.

"That's why I told you! There isn't a moment to lose. Are you going to give the jewels back or not?"

The last trace of Ryoko's previous weakness had vanished; she was now glaring at Tenchi as if she were about to bite him.

"I-I'll give them back. But how?"

"That's what I've been trying to tell you!"

Ryoko's hair literally stood on end from the radiation of her anger.

"Just wish to return them! You're the only one who can touch the Tenchi-ken! Honestly, I don't know how Yosho ended up with such a pathetic descendant, Tenchi!"

"Y-Yes, ma'am..."

Tenchi held the sword hilt in a reverse grip and desperately tried to focus his mind.

In hindsight, this was the beginning of all his misfortune. The fact that he didn't kick this sci-fi anime situation out the door and scream back at the voice from above, call the police, or take any other sane course of action. However, it was perhaps too much to ask of a kindhearted fifteen-year-old boy. Regardless...

Tenchi faced Ryoko, closed his eyes, and began to concentrate with a serious expression. As he did, the jewels on the sword began to glow.

Meanwhile, inside the royal ship *Ryu-Oh* floating above the Masaki household...

The First Princess of the Juraian royal family—the eldest daughter—stared at the monitor showing the Masaki house, waiting irritably for a response.

She was seven hundred and twenty years of age, though seven hundred of those years did not count toward her physical age due to time-stasis. With lustrous black hair tied back so tightly it appeared purple, and dressed in formal attire reminiscent of Heian-period traveling clothes, she was a genuine daughter of the royal house.

The Princess knit her brows slightly, though not enough to mar her classical beauty.

"I wonder if they can even hear me."

"Most certainly."

The answer came immediately. Flanking the Princess were her guardians—beings that looked like simple log pillars at first glance but were actually bodyguards and advisors representing the pinnacle of super-technology.

"It doesn't matter. Fire a shot nearby," the Princess said nonchalantly.

"But... though this is the homeland of the Prince's mother, it is an alien land. Furthermore, it is a Special Protected Area designated by the Galaxy Police. To launch a reckless attack would be..."

The Princess’s eyes narrowed sharply.

"Azaka. I said *nearby*. It is to intimidate that heinous criminal. Is this not exactly why I have wandered for seven hundred years?"

"But, Lady Ayeka..." the guardian named Azaka whispered. "Ryoko’s… statute of limitations for the attack on our Jurai Royal Palace just expired. Moreover,

there are constant Galaxy Police patrols in this sector. No, Princess. Please leave this to us. If I may say so, there is no need to give her a direct warning—"

"Azaka!"

The Princess cut him off sharply.

"I will not tolerate talking back! If you will not do it, I shall. And my aim might just happen to slip."

The Princess's eyes burned with cold fury. The guardian backed down reluctantly but did not forget to exchange a glance with his partner, Kamidake.

"Very well, Lady Ayeka..."

The other guardian, Kamidake, slowly began to calculate the coordinates.

Immediately, the Princess's cold gaze pierced him.

"Kamidake. I know perfectly well what you are thinking. However..."

The Princess—no, Ayeka—caught her breath in a fit of passion.

"The statute of limitations is irrelevant! What do I care for the Galaxy Police? Ryoko is the one responsible for the disappearance of my brother—no, my beloved Brother Yosho! What of my feelings, having my fiancé snatched away before my very eyes?"

Ayeka realized she was shouting at close range and lowered her voice slightly.

"Of course, I do not believe my brother is dead. That woman is the only clue to confirming his whereabouts. I must capture and interrogate her at all costs! But before that, I will make her tremble with fear. I must make an impression on her! Do it now!!"

Finally, unable to contain herself, Ayeka screamed.

A moment later, the first wave of the attack grazed the very edge of the Masaki house.

"Hieeeeeee!"

The house shook along with a massive roar, and the window glass shattered into a million pieces.

Ryoko paid it no mind, continuing to concentrate intently.

"Come! Ryo-Ohki!!"

That’s enough! I can't take this anymore!

Tenchi looked out of the now-airy window and saw a massive spaceship floating directly above. He felt like collapsing in despair.

At that moment...

"It’s here!" Ryoko cried out in joy. "What are you doing, Tenchi! We’re going. Unless you want to die!"

Before the hollow-eyed Tenchi could process it, she grabbed his arm, and in the next instant, the two of them vanished like magic.

Left behind were a house that looked like it had been hit by a major earthquake and, for some reason, Tenchi’s father, Nobuyuki, lying unconscious in the garden.

By the way...

The story is supposed to proceed next to a battle scene between massive warships utilizing onomatopoeia and high-tech jargon, but please allow me to step back about seven hundred years in time. (There are rumors that the author is simply weak with that kind of terminology.)

The Juraian royal family is an ancient lineage with a long and distinguished history. Its origins reportedly trace back roughly ten thousand years. History tells that the founder, who came from a "blue planet filled with water on the periphery," the King of the Ship entered into a contract with Tsunami, and established the Juraian royal family.

Planet Jurai is roughly the same size as Earth, a beautiful planet with a rich flora. The difference from Earth is that two types of intelligent beings coexist there. One is a species of sentient, powerful trees—the Jurai (Thunder Tree's)—which also serves as the brain of a ship. The other is the People of Jurai, a race almost identical to Earthlings, though their hair and eye colors differ.

And the Juraian royal family is the entity that rules over the People of Jurai.

The members of the Royal Family are quite special compared to ordinary Juraians. First, they have long lifespans. While an ordinary Juraian lives about two hundred years (which is still twice that of an Earthling), members of the Royal Family live for nearly two thousand years. Additionally, they possess powers akin to ESP and can own their own personal ships (spaceships).

It is said that this power was gifted when the founder made the contract with Tsunami long ago. In exchange, the royals are required to use their gifted lifespan and power correctly. That is the contract, the source of their power; those who violate the contract—those who act against the heart of Tsunami—unavoidably lose those blessings.

Well, if I keep lecturing on the origins of the Juraian royal family, this will turn into a Royal Academy history lesson, so let's focus on Princess Ayeka.

Ayeka was born as the eldest daughter of the eleventh Juraian Emperor, Azusa, and the First Empress, Misaki. Her younger sister, Sasami, was born twelve years later, but let's set that aside for a moment. The issue is the half-brother she calls her elder brother.

Her brother, Yosho, was born as the eldest son of the Second Empress, Funaho, and was the prince who was supposed to inherit the Juraian throne. I say "supposed to" because he has been missing ever since he flew away from home at the age of sixteen to chase the terrifying space pirate Ryo-Ohki, who had attacked the Royal Palace.

This brother, Yosho, and Ayeka are betrothed. You might think it strange for half-siblings to be engaged, but such taboos apparently do not exist on Jurai. It is likely for the same reason that consanguineous marriages were common among the ruling classes on Earth in the past.

Yosho was a fair-skinned young nobleman, handsome and skilled in both the literary and military arts. In other words, he was a textbook elite—tall, athletic, brilliant, handsome, and with a flash of white teeth when he smiled. Naturally, he was kind-hearted as well. This prince was the object of longing for many noble ladies at the palace, and the young Ayeka was no exception. Regardless of love or marriage, Ayeka felt great pride in her brother, who was eight years her senior, and she looked forward to their distant wedding day, pining for him with all her heart.

She possessed a severe case of a "Brother Complex"—her first love was her big brother.

One day, however, the sky suddenly grew dark, and as an ominous shadow fell, a massive battleship appeared. It was the space pirate ship Ryo-Ohki, also known as the "Ruin Looter." Its objective was apparently the Tenchi-ken, a legendary sword passed down through the Juraian royal family.

Realizing his sword was being targeted, Yosho immediately boarded his own ship, the *Funaho*, and flew into space. His intent was to draw the enemy's attack away to protect Planet Jurai and the Royal Family. Perhaps he also felt a desire to escape the boring palace and test his strength to the fullest. Ryo-Ohki and the *Funaho* engaged in a fierce game of cat and mouse, clashing in repeated combat. Eventually, realizing it was at a disadvantage, Ryo-Ohki fled; the *Funaho* pursued, and communication was lost.

That was the end of it.

The last time Ayeka saw her brother was his gallant figure fighting the wicked female pirate Ryoko, who had broken into the palace before he boarded the *Funaho*. That sight remained vividly burned into Ayeka’s mind even now.

It was only natural for Ayeka to hate and curse Ryoko as the heinous criminal who stole her brother.

Oh, where is my beloved Brother Yosho? Even if this body should vanish as foam upon the great ocean, I shall not rest until I see him once more. Father, Mother, please forgive your daughter Ayeka for departing without a word.

Whether she actually left such a note is unknown, but before her twentieth birthday, Ayeka took her ship, the *Ryu-Oh*, set her coordinates in the direction her brother had gone, and entered cryo sleep.

In truth, Ayeka did not yet know that a ridiculous "bonus" in the form of her sister, Sasami, had come along. And today, seven hundred years later, she discovered the energy signature of the heinous criminal Ryoko she had been searching for in this peripheral region.

Now, the battle was reaching its climax. The stage had moved into outer space.

Ryoko stood tall on the bridge of Ryo-Ohki, shouting orders. Looking at her lively expression, one could see the former glory of the Terror of the Seven Seas. Slumped pathetically at her feet was our protagonist, Tenchi.

It was understandable. Dear readers, how would you feel if you were suddenly grabbed by both arms and teleported into a spaceship overlooking the Earth from afar? There would be nothing left but to pray to the gods.

Terrified, Tenchi stole a glance at Ryoko’s profile. This was not a situation where he could easily strike up a conversation. And... there was something else. A spaceship that talked back? And not with a proper "Roger" or "Acknowledged," but one that answered in cat-like sounds like "myaa" and "mya-myaa"?

The voice of his grandfather echoed in his head: *Regrets come too late*.

Damn that senile old man...

Now that things had come to this, there was one thing Tenchi could say with absolute certainty. Granddad had known this would happen. There was no way he could break the seal of an ogre who had been trapped for seven hundred years and remain safe. Yet, Granddad hadn't given him a single word of warning. Furthermore, he had actually egged him on.

No, no—thinking about this wouldn't help at all. All he should be thinking about was how to get back to Earth. To do that, he first had to escape this battle. Next, he had to trick this monster woman Ryoko into taking him back to where he came from. Then he’d catch Granddad and...

Suddenly grabbed by the collar, Tenchi looked up in surprise. Before he knew it, Ryo-Ohki had been surrounded by a cylindrical barrier and had come to a halt. Ryoko, with an expression like a demon, shook Tenchi violently.

"How can you look so carefree when I'm working so hard over here?!"

"Huh?"

"Don't 'huh' me! We've been caught in that damn Ayeka's barrier. It's because you only gave back one jewel, so we don't have enough power. I'm going to break this miserable barrier, so give back all the jewels. Hurry! If you dally, Ayeka's logs will come and we'll both be captured."

"L-Logs?"

"If I say they're logs, they're logs! What's the matter? Do you want to be captured and tortured by them?"

"Tor... ture?"

Dear readers, Tenchi was by no means lacking in intelligence, but he was still only fifteen years old. Please consider whether anyone could give a clever response while being held by the collar by a monster woman.

What appeared in Tenchi's mind was the silhouette of a woman named Ayeka, who seemed even more terrifying than the Ryoko in front of him, and the monster-logs with arms and legs towering over her on both sides.

"I..." Tenchi whispered involuntarily. "I want to go home."

Ryoko flopped down onto Tenchi's knees. At that moment...

"Heinous criminal, Ryoko! You are under arrest!"

A voice spoke in a strange harmony. Standing before them were two logs. The logs were talking. No, they were harmonizing. They were approaching.

This was a dream. A nightmare.

Tenchi, who had fainted before being pulled into the sub-space passage created by Ayeka’s guardians, Azaka and Kamidake, did not notice the puzzled glance the two exchanged.

Of course, even if he hadn't fainted, there was no way Tenchi could have understood a glance exchanged between "logs"...

Chapter 4:

On the Edge of the Galaxy

Turning the page, we find ourselves at the edge of the galaxy, specifically at the Investigation Division 1 of the Galaxy Police 7th District Headquarters, Solar System Branch. Various officers, including humanoid types, hurried in and out, creating the unique, bustling atmosphere characteristic of a major investigation unit.

At the moment, it appeared that no significant incidents had occurred, as the air in the office was relatively peaceful. In one corner, curled up on a visitor's sofa, a young woman was fast asleep. She clutched a terminal to her chest, her face partially hidden by a wild mane of curly hair.

Her desk—or what one could assume was her desk—was a disaster area. Documents, letters of apology, and half-finished reports were piled haphazardly atop her keyboard, interspersed with snack wrappers and half-eaten donuts. It was a miracle she could find any space to work at all.

Just then, a sharp-looking female detective, apparently returning from field duty, walked by. She was a beauty with flowing deep-violet hair and violet eyes, though her drab brick-colored suit and shocking pink scarf ruined the overall impression. She glanced at the empty desk, then spotted the curly hair rising and falling happily on the sofa, and instinctively clenched her fists.

"And here I was, searching desperately for her, while she's doing this..."

The detective marched over and looked down at the curly haired woman.

"Mihoshi!"

The woman on the sofa knit her brows as if annoyed by the noise and curled up even tighter.

"Mihoshi!"

There was no reaction. The detective stood over her sleeping partner with a look of uncontainable frustration, but then she suddenly crouched down and whispered into the woman’s ear.

"Mihoshi-chan, there’s chocolate. Want to have a tea break?"

Instantly, the woman’s eyes snapped open, and she looked around.

"Chocolate? Where? ...Oh, Kiyone-chan..."

An awkward silence followed.

"I wonder what happened to me. How did I end up In a place like this..."

The woman called Mihoshi hurriedly sat upright on the sofa. As she remembered herself and stood up, she dropped the terminal she had been holding onto her foot. She let out a shriek and collapsed back onto the sofa.

"Ow, ow, ow, ow... What is this thing? I hate it already!"

Kiyone, Mihoshi’s colleague and a renowned First-Class Detective known for her skill, sighed and picked up the terminal.

"Never mind. I was the idiot for waking you up. By the way, while I was searching the entire station for you, what exactly were you doing here clutching a terminal?"

"Eh, me? I was just... well, my desk was so messy, so I thought I’d write my report here... so, where’s the chocolate?"

"...Mihoshi. Come with me for a second!"

Kiyone grabbed Mihoshi by the collar. As she was dragged away, Mihoshi looked around for help.

"Wait, what is it? I have a report to..."

"You have something to do before the report. Here, a rag!"

Handed a rag and a bucket in front of her own desk, Mihoshi looked back at Kiyone with a bewildered expression.

"A rag...?"

"You’re going to clean! Clear off this desk! You’re going to attract cockroaches! Honestly, even if you are Grandmaster Kuramitsu’s granddaughter, you... you’re setting a terrible example for the subordinates!"

Kiyone proceeded to pull out Galaxy Police-issue trash bags and an apron, briskly tossing juice cans and magazines into the bag.

"Come on, don't just stand there dazed. What are you going to do about these coffee-soaked documents? Hmm? ...Wait, isn't this the reference material I lent you? I thought it was never coming back, and here it is..."

Mihoshi’s hand shot out and snatched the bundle of papers, which was half-stained a coffee-brown.

"Um, sorry, Kiyone-chan. I was going to buy a replacement later... sorry. I’ve got it from here, so go back to your seat..."

"My seat is right next to yours!"

"Then, how about you get some coffee in the lobby...?"

"Once the cleaning is done, you’re treating me to a full set meal! I wouldn't mind a full course at Maxim's, actually... Hey, what are you doing?"

"Eh? I thought I’d just take care of this mountain for now..."

"Don't use the Cube! Last time you used that, it took half a day to straighten things out—"

"But they’re just empty numbers, so if I just toss them into that space for a bit..."

Just as Mihoshi replied while busily turning the key to her sub-space personal locker, which looked like a Cube lock... a mountain of junk fell from thin air.

Kiyone was buried under laundry, manga books, cup ramen, and mechanical parts of unknown purpose. Mihoshi looked around the station, which had fallen momentarily silent, and though she turned pale, she managed a bright smile.

"Um, everyone. Sorry for the trouble. If Kiyone-chan asks, tell her I've already submitted my resignation..."

Mihoshi said only that as she backed away, then turned on her heel to flee. However, someone's hand caught her ankle in a firm grip.

"I don't think so!"

Like a zombie crawling out of a grave, a dust-covered Kiyone emerged, pushing aside the laundry.

"Mihoshi...! This time, I am not going to forgive you..."

"K-Kiyone-chan..."

It was just as a furious Kiyone was about to seize Mihoshi. The door opened, and Superintendent Anderson and Chief Nobeyama poked their heads in.

"What is all this racket... Whoa."

Superintendent Anderson, a Leonis-star system citizen from the Lion-head race, sighed as he surveyed the scene: the junk piled on the floor, a beet-red Kiyone, a frozen Mihoshi caught by the collar, and the other officers who were continuing their work as if none of this concerned them.

"Detective Mihoshi. No, First-Class Detective Mihoshi Kuramitsu. If you don't clean up these personal belongings immediately, I'll demote you to Second-Class! Also, you are a young woman, so stop letting your laundry pile up. I don't pay you a salary so low that you can't afford dry cleaning. Furthermore, napping on the visitor sofa is prohibited. Understood?!"

Snickers and giggles broke out among the surrounding officers.

"I'm sorry..."

Mihoshi murmured in a voice that seemed ready to vanish, her face red, as she began to call the Galaxy Police's designated dry cleaners.

At that moment...

"Oh?"

An emergency contact signal flashed on her terminal. Mihoshi casually switched to receive.

"Yes, Investigation Division 1... Eh, Kagato?"

The atmosphere in the station changed instantly. Superintendent Anderson lunged for the nearest terminal, switching it over as he responded with a grim expression.

"It's me. What, the patrol squad was wiped out...? Right, I understand. Send out the orders immediately."

Superintendent Anderson turned to the officers and began issuing instructions in a stern tone.

"The ship *Soja*, belonging to the permanent fugitive Kagato, has appeared. Coordinates are at Point X near Cygnus. The patrol squad seems to have been hit by an unknown energy weapon; communication is down. Andy and Sonia, head to the scene for the investigation. The rest of the staff, stay on standby. That is all."

The Superintendent hurried out, and a buzz of excitement spread through the station. The mid-level duo called Andy and Sonia quickly finished their preparations and exchanged grim glances.

"Sonia-san," Mihoshi called out instinctively. "Kagato is..."

The tall, beautiful detective named Sonia smiled at Mihoshi as she checked the energy charge on her hand cannon.

"How old are you again? Twenty-three? Then you might not know. The permanent criminal Kagato is a legendary mad scientist. He once destroyed an entire planet just to get his hands on a single mineral. He did it with that massive metallic-bodied battleship called the *Soja*. I saw the real thing three hundred years ago. Not here, but in a different star system. Even a fleet from my home planet was no match for it. My country vanished in an instant..."

Sonia readjusted her hand cannon on her shoulder.

"This thing won't be of any use. But I can still give those hyena pirates who flock to the aftermath a piece of my mind. Come on, we have to go."

Sonia placed a hand on Mihoshi’s shoulder and gave it a friendly tap.

"Don't make Kiyone-chan angry. A good partner is worth more than a hundred weapons."

Sonia and Andy departed. Mihoshi looked at Kiyone and shouted instinctively.

"I’ll be praying to the God of the Galaxy Police!"

A reply came back from beyond the door.

"For you two as well! And for the laundry!"

Mihoshi turned red again and began to re-dial the number for the dry cleaners.

Meanwhile, Tenchi was wandering through a jungle that was dark even during the day. The stifling humidity of the vegetation made it difficult to breathe. All the plants were things he had never seen before.

"Where am I... Why am I in a place like this...?"

As if answering his question, the sounds of birds reached his ears—cries like long, drawn-out screams, and metallic, rhythmic sounds like laughter. Tenchi’s entire body froze.

This isn't Earth. Where did that monster woman go? Leaving me in a place like this.

Tenchi tried to call out for help. (*Someone*...) It was strange. No voice came out. (*Someone*...) Tenchi struggled as if suffering from sleep paralysis. (*Help me*...)

Suddenly, his body was free.

"Are you awake?"

It was unmistakably the sound of Japanese.

"Big brother, are you okay?"

Beyond a wooden lattice, a young girl was kneeling, peering down at Tenchi.

Ah. What, was I just dreaming? I wonder where I am...

In the next moment, Tenchi sat up with a start. A pair of ruby-like eyes were staring at him. Furthermore, what he had thought was a lattice was actually a cage made of living wood. His heart began to race.

It wasn't a dream. This place... was not Earth; it was some other planet. His memories came rushing back. That's right—he had been attacked by those log-like monsters and lost consciousness.

So, is this inside a spaceship? But why is this girl speaking Japanese?

"What's wrong?" The girl knit her brows with concern. "Does it hurt somewhere? Should I call my sister for you?"

Tenchi shook his head immediately. He couldn't deal with any more mysterious people showing up.

"N-No, it's fine. More importantly..."

Tenchi thought rapidly. At the very least, this girl didn't look dangerous. If she were the age she appeared to be, she was a child of only nine or ten. For some reason, they could communicate, and she might even become an ally and help him.

Tenchi put forth the greatest effort possible for someone in his situation and gave a bright smile.

"What's your name?"

"Me? I'm Sasami. What about you, big brother?"

The girl seemed relieved and answered with a smile.

"I'm Tenchi."

Tenchi also replied with relief. Looking closely, she was quite a cute girl. Her long, light-blue hair was tied into two high pigtails, making her look somewhat like a rabbit. She wore expensive-looking, kimono-style clothes. Though her way of speaking was childlike, her mannerisms possessed a certain elegance.

Then, Tenchi remembered something.

"A moment ago, you said 'sister,' right? By any chance, is that the person named Ayeka?"

The girl,Sasami,seemed surprised.

"How do you know that, big brother?"

"Well... just a hunch."

Tenchi faltered. *Where is Ryoko?* Based on the way she spoke, it seemed this girl's sister and Ryoko had a significant history. He didn't know if the girl knew the details, but he didn't want to be seen as Ryoko’s accomplice.

Tenchi skillfully began his persuasion.

"Listen, there was a person named Ryoko, right? I was brought here against my will by her. I want to get out of here and, if possible, go back to where I was."

"Oh, that space pirate lady?" Sasami asked nonchalantly. "She’s talking with my sister right now. Hey, big brother, are you an acquaintance of hers? She’s a famous pirate, right? Sasami is still little, so I don't know much about her."

Sasami suddenly peeked at Tenchi's face from the corner of her eye, as if she had just thought of something.

"Big brother, do you want to get out?"

"Y-Yeah." Tenchi nodded, feeling surprised inwardly. "Can you open this?"

"Hmm, what should I do?" Sasami stepped away from the lattice, looking troubled. "It’ll be bad if my sister finds out... You see, Sasami isn't actually supposed to be here. When my sister ran away from home, I just followed her on my own."

"Ran away from home?"

"Yes. My sister is..." Sasami cut her words short. "Hey, big brother, don't you want to get out? If you play with Sasami, I might let you out. What do you say?"

"Play?"

"Sasami was so bored. Hey, what's Earth like? Are there toys? Animals?"

"Wait, wait, just a second."

If he let her continue, the questions would keep coming and he'd never get out of the cage. Tenchi decided to gamble his fate on this alien girl.

"If you let me out, I'll do anything. I promise."

Sasami's face lit up.

"Then move back a bit."

When Tenchi moved away from the lattice, Sasami took something resembling a sword hilt from her sleeve and touched the cage—the tree branches. A thin light signal reached the upper cluster of leaves, which seemed to be the release mechanism. In the next moment, the branches split left and right and were pulled upward.

"Whoa... that's amazing. Can I see that for a second?"

When Tenchi reached out casually, Sasami stepped back quickly.

"I can't. This belongs only to Sasami. No one else is allowed to touch it."

"Oh, is that so? ...Sorry. I didn't mean anything by it. It's just that I used to have something similar... Wait, where is it?"

Sasami approached slowly, watching Tenchi with interest as he searched his clothes.

"You too, big brother? Then, was the Master Key in my sister's room the one you had?"

"Eh?"

Tenchi suddenly became uneasy. *I hadn't even thought about the possibility that the Tenchi-ken had been taken away.* He saw it now. That sword was surely the treasure of the woman named Ayeka, and Ryoko had stolen it. That meant he would definitely be interrogated.

Wait. If that really was a legendary sword, it would have belonged to that samurai from space called Yosho. No way—could that person be an ancestor of this Ayeka woman...? No, that's not it. Regardless of what happened between

Ryoko and Ayeka, it was an event from seven hundred years ago, so the math wouldn't add up unless Ayeka was over seven hundred years old. Hmm...

"I'm overthinking it," Tenchi said aloud, then shook his head in a hurry.

"Overthinking what?" Sasami looked up at him with a puzzled face.

"No, nothing. Anyway, uh, Sasami-chan. I'd like to go somewhere else."

Sasami showed her innocent smile again.

"Okay. My sister will find you if you stay here. Where should we go? The *Ryu-Oh* is huge! Do you want to see the fish? Or the animals?"

"Hmm... anywhere is fine. Lead the way. If possible, I want to find a way home to Earth as soon as possible."

"Home... you mean Earth?"

"Yeah."

"That might be a bit difficult." Sasami knit her brows as she began to walk. "To move this ship, you need my sister's key. Sasami's key is for a different ship, so it won't work."

Sasami took out the hilt from earlier to show him.

"I can't mess with my sister's key... Oh, I know! Maybe the Master Key of Brother Yosho could move it. This is perfect! My sister isn't in her room right now, so let's go get it! But don't go home right away—when you leave, you have to take Sasami with you, okay?"

"Eh?"

When Tenchi asked back in bewilderment, Sasami laughed playfully.

"I mean, you haven't played with Sasami yet, right? And you promised to do anything if I let you out. So, I want you to take Sasami to Earth."

"....."

Tenchi was speechless. He was now in an even tighter spot than when he was inside the cage.

"Then let's go get it. Hurry!"

With that, Sasami ran off without looking back.

"W-Wait!"

Sasami-chan. I still have so many things I want to ask. I don't want to sneak into a woman's room and get caught by those logs again, and I don't want to be interrogated. I just want to go back safely to Earth—no, to my own room in Okayama. And of course, I mean I want to return 'alone.'

Tenchi shouted in his heart as he desperately chased Sasami's small figure as she ran ahead, nearly disappearing into the alien jungle.

He did not yet realize, even in his dreams, that his room in Okayama had been brought inside Ryo-Ohki along with his entire house via spatial compression.

Chapter 5:

Tenchi and Sasami’s Encounter

A little while before Tenchi and Sasami met and hit it off...

The aforementioned Princess Ayeka was enjoying an elegant tea time in her private room surrounded by nature. Before her, Ryoko hung suspended in mid-air, dangling upside down.

"Ryoko-san."

Ayeka spoke as if it were perfectly natural for her guest to be hanging there like a piece of laundry.

"It has been quite a long time. Surely you haven't forgotten me."

Pinned between Ayeka’s two guardians and unable to move, Ryoko shot a glance at Ayeka and replied in an overtly contemptuous tone.

"’Me,’ is it? You were just a brat seven hundred years ago. I look away for a second and you’ve aged quite a bit."

The hand holding the teacup stopped.

No, if I let her provoke me, I will be falling right into this heinous criminal’s trap. At any rate, I must find out about Brother Yosho.

Ayeka exercised a level of self-control that was apparent even to onlookers. She slowly placed her teacup back onto the saucer and stood up with an elegant air.

"Where is my brother? Furthermore, why did that Earthling boy have this sword?"

Ayeka gripped the Tenchi-ken and slowly approached Ryoko.

"Could you ask your questions one at a time? I just woke up and I’m sleepy."

Ryoko looked away with a look of extreme annoyance and let out a large yawn, as if to prove her words.

The Tenchi-ken trembled in Ayeka’s hand.

"Ryoko-san."

The guardians were not the only ones to sense the bloodlust in that voice. Apparently realizing she had pushed her teasing too far, Ryoko turned her face toward Ayeka (though, being upside down, she ended up giving her a look of looking down her nose) and added:

"Why don't you ask Tenchi directly?"

"Tenchi?"

Bewildered by the unexpected response, Ayeka reflexively asked back.

"What could that boy possibly know?"

Ayeka had not yet realized she had handed the initiative of the interrogation over to her captive. Furthermore, she hadn't noticed that the reply contained significant information. It was a textbook example of a poor interrogation.

"Come to think of it, that sword is called Tenchi too, isn't it? I thought for a moment you were making fun of me."

Ryoko smiled as she added this. Of course, it was Ayeka who was being made fun of.

Even a fool would realize they were being toyed with after being told that much. What little self-control Ayeka originally possessed vanished without a trace.

"You heinous criminal!! Tell me about my brother this instant! To begin with, his disappearance is entirely your fault. I will not tolerate you mocking me any further! Speak at once!"

Regardless of whether the other person held any information (in this case, Ryoko truly didn't know), getting this enraged was exactly what the opponent

wanted. However, Ayeka, having traveled across the stars in search of her brother, was desperate.

Ryoko replied as if exhausted.

"Like I've been saying, I just woke up. I was sealed away by your insufferable brother for seven hundred years and haven't stepped foot outside since. How am I supposed to know what happened to your brother?"

"....."

Poor Ayeka was completely thrown into confusion by those words.

"...Do you truly not know?"

"I don't."

The reply was flat and left no room for further questioning.

"How can this be..."

A silence fell, heavy with a monologue that asked, *What was all my hard work for?* Indeed, those very words were racing through Ayeka's mind.

However, there is a limit to all things, and Ayeka's patience was no exception.

"How can this be..."

A localized, directionless rage began to well up within her.

"Liar!"

Ayeka glared fixedly at her captive.

"You are lying! If you truly didn't know, why did you try to flee back then? Azaka! Kamidake! Punish this woman!"

"Eh?"

It was an utterly nonsensical demand.

Before she could even scream, a shock ran through Ryoko’s body. Of course, it was a shockwave adjusted so as not to burn her to a crisp. Ryoko twisted her body, knitting her brows in pain.

"Ahhh! I’m gonna... I’m gonna cuuuuuh...!"

Ayeka’s complexion changed instantly.

"W-What is wrong with her?"

"Lady Ayeka, if I may be so bold as to speak, this woman is..."

Azaka’s voice, which also sounded flustered, cut in.

"That is enough! Stop!"

Instinctively interpreting those moans as belonging to the bedroom, Ayeka turned red all the way to her ears and ordered the torture to cease.

Ryoko, feeling inwardly relieved that her tactic had worked, wore a faint smirk. No matter how tough Ryoko was, her body wouldn't hold out against a princess who was this close to snapping.

Ayeka turned her head away to avoid seeing Ryoko’s irritating smirk and cooled her still-flushed cheeks with both hands.

(This lewd monster... thinking I know nothing... how shall I deal with her...)

As Ayeka was considering various means of retaliation—interrogation now being an afterthought—a small, spherical flying object appeared with a light buzzing sound.

"Princess. It is time for your rest. Please return to your sleeping quarters immediately."

Ayeka felt weary. This spherical object was a lady-in-waiting exclusive to the Juraian royal family. It was an educator and monitor that followed royal minors, managing their behavior and storing all daily data. If enough misconduct accumulated, the communication functions would activate, and she could be summoned back to Planet Jurai without question.

However, Ayeka attempted a small bit of resistance.

"Later is fine. I am busy right now!"

"That is not permitted. This situation does not qualify as an emergency. Please continue tomorrow."

Suddenly, an unreserved laugh echoed from behind her.

"'Please continue tomorrow,' she says. Now there's a good idea. Looky, looky, it's already past your bedtime."

Ayeka turned around sharply, her cheeks flushed with anger.

"Silence! You rotten woman!"

The lady-in-waiting's rebuke followed immediately.

"Princess. Please mind your language. What would your mother say if she heard you?"

Ryoko burst out laughing, clutching her stomach.

"Her mother? This is great. Shouldn't you just hurry home? Instead of sticking your nose into things that don't concern you."

"Mind your own business!"

Ayeka snapped back, but her expression didn't have as much force as her tone.

"There, there, little girl. Go to sleep now."

Still upside down, Ryoko waved her hand dismissively at Ayeka in a mocking tone.

"You..."

Ayeka finally reached the point where her rage made her speechless. She turned on her heel without a word and walked away quickly.

"Lady Ayeka!"

Kamidake's slow voice chased after her back.

"What shall we do with this one?"

Ayeka stopped. She turned back with a terrifying expression.

"Fillet her into three pieces and throw the rest down the dust chute! Do not approach my bedroom for at least eight hours! Furthermore, let nothing happen. Is that understood?"

"As you wish."

Left behind were Ryoko, whose smirk hadn't faded, and the guardians standing like wooden dolls on either side. A moment later, they too vanished. The cold, half-drunk tea remaining on the table was cleared away by unseen hands, leaving only the sound of birds once more.

Let us return to our poor protagonist.

Tenchi had been walking behind Sasami for nearly an hour through a jungle as untouched as the Amazon rainforest.

"Hey, Sasami-chan."

Pulling his foot out of some sphagnum moss, Tenchi shouted toward the back of the rabbit-like head that was hopping along happily in front of him.

"Where is your sister’s room? Is it still going to take a while?"

Sasami stopped and turned around.

"It’s right there. If we use the passages. Sasami just walked because I thought you might want to see the inside of the *Ryu-Oh*, big brother."

"Passages?"

"Sub-space passages. You know, the ones Azaka and Kamidake used when they brought you here."

"Ah..."

...Even if you say that, I was unconscious then, so I wouldn't know.

Tenchi cursed inwardly, but he surmised that it was some means of transportation based on an ultra-scientific method of spatial utilization. Basically, a warp or teleport.

"Do you want me to explain?" Sasami asked with concern.

"Eh? No, it’s fine. I probably wouldn't understand if you did, and besides, I just want my sword back."

"Oh, good."

Sasami showed a relieved smile.

"Actually, Sasami doesn't know much about them either. I’ve never really thought about it. See, Sasami is the second child? I wasn't nagged about studying as much as my sister. My sister is the one who will inherit the Juraian throne, not Sasami."

"Ah, I see."

Tenchi said this, but he still didn't really understand what the Juraian royal family was, where Planet Jurai was, or why the heir had run away from home to wander through space.

"Hey, Sasami-chan," Tenchi called out. "Can I ask you something?"

"What? About the passages?"

"No, about you... well, can we rest for a bit?"

To tell the truth, Tenchi was starting to tire.

Please recall the timeline. Ryoko appeared on the roof of Okayama Prefectural Kurashiki Nishi Technical High School at 5:00 PM; after various events, he reached home at 7:00 PM; then Ayeka’s spaceship appeared; and after his memory was temporarily reset, his "new life" began at approximately 9:00 PM Earth time. Calculating that another two hours had passed, it was now around 11:00 PM.

Since Tenchi didn't have a watch, he didn't calculate it quite this precisely (in fact, to him, it felt like that skipped class had been months ago), but now that he was somewhat removed from the immediate threat to his life, he

remembered that he was exhausted, hungry, and—to put it simply—about to collapse.

"Big brother, are you okay?"

Seeing Tenchi slump down onto the grass, Sasami ran over.

"Sasami-chan, you're really kind..." Tenchi murmured in a weak voice.

"It's strange. Even though you're an alien, I don't feel like that at all. Just yesterday, I was a normal high school student who never dreamed that spaceships, aliens, or ogres in shrines existed. And yet today, here I am walking through a vast jungle inside a gigantic spaceship with a cute alien girl. If it were the me from yesterday, I'd be certain this was a dream. Actually, I'm still half-convinced it is. If it's a dream, it's not strange at all for me to communicate with an alien or have things go my way. And when I wake up, I'll be in my own bed, thinking, 'Ah, I have to go to school today'..."

Tenchi hugged his knees and buried his face.

I want to go home. I'm not cut out for heart-pounding adventures. Because heroes in adventure stories don't get exhausted and complain to little girls...

Tenchi's fatigue hit him all at once now, and he felt almost despondent.

"Sasami-chan. Help me. I don't even need the sword back anymore. I just want to go home."

Sasami looked troubled. She started to say something but swallowed her words, instead tentatively reaching out to stroke Tenchi's hair.

"...I'm sorry. Sasami was only thinking about herself. Please don't look so sad. Sasami will go get the sword for you. And Sasami will ask my sister for you. So you can go home properly. But..."

Sasami faltered.

"Will you come with me, big brother? Because my sister is scary when she's angry."

Tenchi looked up and blushed, realizing he had distressed the young girl.

What am I saying? Is this how a high school student, someone who usually talks like an adult, is supposed to act?

"I’m sorry, Sasami-chan. I got a little depressed. I’m fine now. I’ve recovered."

Tenchi stood up with forced energy, but he immediately became dizzy and sat back down.

"Big brother!"

"I-I’m fine... I think. It’s just, well..."

"?"

"I’m hungry..."

"Oh, is that all?"

Sasami burst out laughing in relief.

"I only have chocolate, but do you want some?"

"Chocolate?"

"Don't you know chocolate, big brother? Here, this."

As she spoke, Sasami took out a chocolate-colored food wrapped in silver foil that looked exactly like chocolate.

"Chocolate..."

Tenchi took the bar-shaped food, smelled it, licked it a little, and then murmured in genuine impressed wonder.

"It’s okay. I heard that Earthlings and Juraians are almost the same. You know why? Because a long, long time ago, Earth and Jurai were brothers. That’s why the people living there are the same too."

"Huh... and this is the proof?"

Tenchi regained a bit of his energy and asked back, ignoring the "brothers" talk.

"Hmm. I don't know, but... you can find this anywhere. But come to think of it, it is a bit strange, isn't it? Sasami and you only met today, but we can understand each other through chocolate."

"Yeah..."

Tenchi suddenly remembered a scene from a famous movie. *E.T.*—specifically the scene where he lures an alien he can't communicate with using M&M's. Plus, people use chocolate to convey love on Valentine's Day.

"I see!"

Chocolate creates communication. In other words, chocolate is a pan-universal message of peace.

It'll be fine. Tenchi thought, almost instinctively. *If we talk, we can understand each other. That is what chocolate—what culture—is.*

It was a logic he would have laughed at in any other situation, but for the current Tenchi, it was a precious discovery.

"Sasami-chan, thank you. I'll give it a try. If it doesn't work, I'll just think of something else."

"Right, right."

Sasami nodded with relief, seeing that Tenchi had regained his spirits.

"By the way, can you see that?"

Sasami pointed toward the base of a massive tree far in the distance.

"That's my sister's room. The lights are on."

"Eh?"

"It looks like my sister is back."

"....."

"I guess we took too long of a detour."

Tenchi felt his hope slipping through his fingers.

"Well, nothing can be helped. Let's just go. Sitting here won't change anything."

"Y-Yeah..."

Life, after all, was not sweet enough to be solved by chocolate alone. Tenchi and Sasami jumped into a nearby hole, a passage, and vanished.

Meanwhile, Ayeka, who had been thoroughly mocked by Ryoko, returned to her bedroom and threw herself onto the bed, sobbing.

"It’s awful... it’s too much. Just when I thought I could finally see my brother, that woman intends to play dumb until the very end. Fine. If that is how she wants it, I am prepared. Just you watch. Tomorrow, I will make sure you suffer even more..."

After crying and cursing for a while, the exhausted Ayeka realized she was still gripping the Tenchi-ken.

"Brother..."

The Tenchi-ken her brother had owned. Yes, now this was her only clue. The two jewels glowing on the hilt told the story of her brother’s victory. Her brother must have used this sword to absorb the energy of the hateful Ryoko and seal her power.

But where is my brother now?

Ayeka finally realized something important. *Come to think of it, who was that Earthling boy who had this?*

Ah, that’s right. I believe he was called 'Tenchi.' Why did he have the same name as my brother’s sword?

Ayeka recalled the face of the boy, who still looked young and appeared to be younger than herself.

I thought he was merely a poor local caught up in Ryoko’s schemes and just left him locked up there, but what if that boy truly knows something...? Poor thing. I must let him out of the cell and give him a meal.

Contrary to her sharp tongue, the kind-hearted Ayeka was struck by a sense of regret and started to call for her guardians. However, her hand stopped weakly.

"Never mind. Surely the guardians wouldn't kill the boy. I am exhausted. Tomorrow, I will be able to think of a better plan..."

Ayeka managed to pull herself up with great effort, shed her heavy formal attire, and dressed in a single nightgown.

"Brother..."

The lights dimmed. A single tear traced down her cheek, wetting the silk pillow. Ayeka held the Tenchi-ken tightly to her chest and fell into a dreamless, heavy sleep.

Chapter 6:

"You Mean You Want Me to Take This?"

"You mean you want me to take this? ...You've got to be kidding."

Having successfully slipped into Ayeka's bedroom exactly as Sasami had instructed, Tenchi stood speechless at the sight of the Tenchi-ken gripped firmly in Ayeka's hands.

Ayeka was breathing softly in her sleep. Tenchi stood helplessly by the bed, looking down at the sleeping princess's profile as a whirlwind of thoughts raced through his mind.

Was this the cold-blooded, arrogant princess Ryoko had described? The princess who had left her home planet and wandered the stars for seven hundred years just to reclaim this sword?

At this point, Tenchi was unaware of the "searching thousands of miles for her brother" situation; he believed Ayeka had come to Earth solely for revenge.

She's... Tenchi reflexively swallowed. *She's actually pretty cute.*

Her slender arms were crossed over her chest as if to cover the neckline of her sleeveless, translucent nightgown. The Tenchi-ken was definitely there. According to Sasami, to move this ship, one needed either the Key of Ryu-Oh—which Ayeka wore—or the Master Key, which was the Tenchi-ken.

Thus, to follow Sasami's plan, he had to take either the Key of Ryu-Oh (the tiara on Ayeka's forehead) or the Tenchi-ken gripped in her hands. It was an Ultra-A Class difficulty multiple-choice question.

Unable to make a move, Tenchi found himself staring at the delicate line of her jaw, the soft curve of her cheeks, and the gentle rise and fall of her chest as it moved in a smooth curve from her throat.

"I'm in trouble..." Tenchi murmured in his heart.

Standing there, he felt more and more like a total pervert. *Was this really the right thing to do? Why couldn't he just ask her fairly and squarely to return his sword? Should he wake the princess up?*

Tenchi mocked himself. *No, I promised Sasami-chan I'd do anything. Besides, I found this sword. What's wrong with taking back what's mine?*

Tenchi shook off his less-than-pure thoughts. With the utmost caution, he reached out to pry Ayeka's fingers loose and reclaim the sword. Just then, Ayeka stirred and rolled over. Cold sweat erupted across Tenchi's entire body.

Oh man, what am I doing?

Tenchi leaned over Ayeka, attempting to peel her slender fingers away from the hilt once more.

At that exact moment, Ayeka's eyes snapped open. *Oh... what beautiful eyes.* Deep crimson eyes that seemed to pull him in—even deeper than "Pigeon Blood," the highest grade of ruby.

"KYAAAAAAAH!"

Tenchi's trance was shattered into a million pieces by a scream that sounded like tearing silk.

"Vile intruder! Someone, come quickly! Azaka! Kamidake!"

It's a misunderstanding! No, there was no time for that. Just before Ayeka could kick him away, Tenchi frantically snatched the Tenchi-ken and bolted without looking back.

"Seize that insolent man! Quickly! Argh, what are you doing?!"

By then, Tenchi had already leapt down the stairs, grabbed the hand of Sasami—who had been hiding behind a shrub—and was running for dear life.

It was only after Tenchi’s silhouette had vanished for some time that Ayeka realized the intruder’s identity.

"How dare he... Why would he take my brother's memento, the Tenchi-ken...?"

After ordering the guardians to pursue the intruder in a fit of rage, Ayeka suddenly felt an ominous foreboding and clutched the front of her nightgown. *I am overlooking something vital.*

Who let that boy out of the cell? Why would that boy risk so much just to get the Tenchi-ken back? What connection is there between my brother’s sword and that boy?

Ayeka, her expression grim, quickly threw on her formal attire and stepped into the passage to follow the guardians.

"Faster, big brother! Faster!"

Our protagonist, Tenchi, was performing the feat of desperately dodging the oncoming "logs"—the guardians—while carrying a kicking, giggling Sasami in his arms.

"Sasami-chan! Do something! Can't you stop those logs or something?!"

"Logs? Oh, the guardians. They’re my sister’s servants, so Sasami can't do anything about them. Ah! Not that way, this way!"

As Tenchi ran wildly, he cursed in his head. *Damn, this kid is actually pretty heavy!*

"What about the passage? Which way do I go?"

There it was! Tenchi ran desperately toward a passage that opened like a hollow at the base of a tree.

"Ah, not there! That’s the one from earlier—"

"HIEEEEEEEEEE!"

It was too late. Sliding through space like a roller coaster, Tenchi thought—completely out of character—*Now this is a real adventure movie*.

"Ow..."

The fall ended abruptly. Below them was soft grassland. Before them were the latticed branches he had seen before... and then, he heard the voice he least wanted to hear in the world.

"Yo, Tenchi! Where on earth have you been?"

It was Ryoko. And this was the cell from earlier—specifically, Ryoko's side of it.

Aaaah...

The moment Tenchi saw Ryoko sprawled out on the grass, he collapsed as if he'd developed sudden anemia. Willpower: Zero. Physical Strength: Single digits. It was a disastrous state of affairs.

"That was fast, big brother! Sasami has never had so much fun. Going back to the cell might be a bit bad, though. Hey, hey, let's do it again after we rest. This time we can do it without the guardians! Hey, hey..."

Sasami was the only one talking excitedly, her face beaming with joy.

"What is this kid? Where did you bring her from?" Ryoko stood up with a suspicious look.

"Oh, nice to meet you. I'm Ayeka's younger sister, Sasami. Pleased to meet you." Sasami bowed politely before the legendary space pirate she was seeing up close for the first time.

"Huh?"

"So, Auntie, are you a friend of Tenchi-onichan?"

At first, Ryoko knit her brows as if she didn't understand the question, looking down at the strangely polite brat. *Auntie...? Friend...? Who's an "Auntie"?*

As soon as the meaning of the question sank into the depths of Ryoko's heart, she suddenly grabbed Sasami by the collar and shook her.

"Hey! Are you calling *me* 'Auntie'?"

"Ah, sorr... Big Sister!"

Sasami desperately corrected herself between shakes. Truly, life lessons are learned in moments like these.

"That's right. Big Sister. I'm only seventeen, you know! How am I an 'Auntie'?! Honestly..."

"Sorry. It's just, you looked like you had more life experience than Big Sister Ayeka."

This is why children are terrifying, Tenchi thought as he lay exhausted, listening to the comedy routine starting in the corner of his mind. *She might actually be the one person who can beat Ryoko...*

Suddenly, Ryoko shoved Sasami aside and marched over to Tenchi, grabbing him by the collar.

"Tenchi! Where is it? The Tenchi-ken?" She began searching his pockets and the inside of his shirt as she spoke.

"Stop it!" Tenchi shook off Ryoko's hand and pulled out the Tenchi-ken he had tucked into his trousers.

"Ooh! You're actually quite impressive!" Ryoko hugged Tenchi joyfully and examined the jewels on the Tenchi-ken. "One, two... Thanks, Tenchi."

Ryoko leaned in so close their noses almost touched and smirked.

"L-Let go!"

"Just stay still."

Ryoko seemed to think Tenchi had reclaimed the sword specifically for her sake. "It's inconvenient when I'm low on power."

Through the body of the immobilized Tenchi, he could feel the power of the jewels flowing into Ryoko.

"Mmm... yeah, this is the feeling. I’m coming back to life." The center of Ryoko’s forehead began to glow faintly.

At that moment...

"That is enough!"

A cold voice rang out. Ayeka had emerged from the passage, followed by her guardians.

"Tch... You’re here already?" Ryoko shoved Tenchi away and quickly moved behind Sasami. "Pull back those logs! Or else..."

Ryoko’s arm wrapped around Sasami’s slender neck.

"Big Sister!"

"Sasami?" Ayeka’s eyes widened in disbelief. "Sasami... why are you here?"

"Never mind that, do something!" Sasami, held in a headlock by Ryoko, reached out a hand imploringly.

"Why are *you* here?! Don't tell me you’ve been sleeping for seven hundred years too? Oh, if Mother and Father find out... why did you follow me?!" Ayeka turned pale.

I can't believe she followed me. I must return to Jurai. No—I might find out where my brother is. I can't do that.

"I wrote a letter, so it’s fine!" Sasami, sensing her sister’s inner turmoil, struggled to break free from Ryoko’s grip. "Hey, let go! My sister and I are busy right now!"

"Huh?" Ryoko cut in, wondering what on earth was going on with these two. "I don't know what’s happening, but what about me?"

"This is no time for you!" Ayeka marched up to Sasami, ignoring Ryoko, and began to shout. "What have you done?! What do you mean, a letter? What did you write to Father?!"

"I said I was worried about you going alone, so I’d come too. You didn't notice at all, Big Sister!"

"What?!"

"Didn't you know? When the *Ryu-Oh* took off, Father and Mother were down there waving their hands."

"....."

Ayeka staggered backward. *My... my feelings... my tragic resolve that has wandered for seven hundred years... what was it all for?!*

"So it’s okay. Sorry. But when you get obsessed, Big Sister, you lose sight of everything around you. Sasami was worried..." Sasami talked a mile a minute, trying to gloss over the fact that she was a stowaway.

"Um, sorry to interrupt your family business," Ryoko interrupted with a fed-up expression. "But instead of having a sisterly spat through a cage, could you listen to me for a bit? I’m not here to mediate a fight. I’m taking this kid hostage. Do you actually understand that?"

"You, be quiet for a moment!" Ayeka snapped. "I am beginning to understand how this happened."

Ayeka looked over the group in the cell. "Sasami! You’re the one who let that man escape. I’ll be hearing a convincing explanation for that later..." She pointed a finger directly at him. "Tenchi, was it? We met a moment ago. The Tenchi-ken you hold belonged to my brother, Yosho. Why do you have it? Do you know my brother?"

"Your brother?"

Tenchi, who had suddenly been put on the spot, looked at Ayeka in confusion and then down at the sword. "I know a person named Yosho..."

"Oh!" Ayeka’s face lit up.

"But he lived seven hundred years ago. Grandpa said he’s my ancestor..."

"I do not care about that! Where—where is my brother now?"

Tenchi’s mind was in a muddle. *This woman thinks her brother is alive. That’s why she came looking for him. But there’s no way a person from seven hundred years ago—even an alien—could still be alive.*

"I think he’s dead..." Tenchi replied reluctantly. "To be honest, I don't know much. I found this sword in the shrine where Ryoko was sealed. Anyway, could you let me out? I want to go home. I’ll give you back the sword."

Tenchi held out the sword.

"What did you say?" came a whispered reply. Ayeka hadn't seemed to hear anything else. "My brother is dead? Is that what you said?"

Ayeka’s face was deathly pale; her lips lost their color and trembled. "What nonsense! Lying will not help you. Why would you say such a thing? What are you hiding?"

"I’m not hiding anything!" Tenchi reflexively argued back. "I’m sorry for startling you earlier. But Sasami-chan said that with this sword, we might be able to move the ship..."

"Do you really think someone like *you* could use the Tenchi-ken?" Ayeka shouted back in a rage. "The Tenchi-ken is a treasure of the Juraian royal family! No one can even touch it unless my brother has acknowledged them!"

Then, Ayeka gasped at her own words. "No... could you be..."

"Finally noticed?" Ryoko chimed in with a smirk. "This guy seems to be made of different stuff. He’s the descendant of your precious brother. Well, that doesn't matter to me. All I want is his power. Sorry, but I’m not handing him over to you."

Laughing, Ryoko pressed herself against Tenchi and began to focus her will again.

"Stop it!" Tenchi, startled, tried to use the sword as a shield to escape from Ryoko. "I won't let you get any stronger. Let go! I want to get out of here!"

As if it had heard his words, the Tenchi-ken began to glow. An arrow of light shot toward the cell’s release mechanism. The cell opened effortlessly.

"Eh?" Tenchi was the most surprised of all. "No way... it had that kind of power?" Then he remembered Sasami’s key opening the cell earlier.

"Tenchi-onichan, you really can use it! That’s amazing!" Sasami ran over excitedly.

"W-What should I do next?"

"That’s obvious! Try and see if you can move the ship!" Sasami pulled on Tenchi’s arm impatiently.

"Stop it, Sasami! I... I will not permit such a thing!"

Ayeka stood before Tenchi in a state of near-panic. *Brother is dead... this boy is his descendant... the Tenchi-ken, my brother's sword... the Master Key is synchronizing with this boy's wavelength. ...Why? No one but my brother should be able to use it... Ah... Sasami doesn't know that much. That’s why she can be so simply surprised... Then, Brother is... Brother is already...*

Ayeka felt faint and slumped toward Tenchi’s arms.

"A-Ayeka-san?!"

"Let go of me!" Snapping back to her senses, Ayeka shook off Tenchi’s hand, lost her balance, fell to her knees, and burst into tears. "Get out! Leave me alone! I can't take this anymore. No—wait. Give me back my brother’s memento!"

"Ayeka... san?" Tenchi’s heart ached, knowing that even though it was the truth, he had caused this noble woman to panic. "Please, don't cry... look, I'll do whatever I can..."

Tenchi knelt, attempting to return the Tenchi-ken to Ayeka.

At that moment, the ship shook violently with a massive impact, and something burst through a section of the floor.

"Kyaaaah!" Ayeka cried out, falling flat.

"Finally, you’re here. We’re going, Tenchi!" Ryoko’s hand shot out and grabbed Tenchi by the collar.

"Myaaaa-n!"

A joyful cry echoed from Ryo-Ohki, who had smashed through the side of the *Ryu-Oh* with her giant ram.

"Wait! What about those people?"

Before Tenchi could finish his sentence, his vision turned white. By the time Ayeka looked up in a daze, both Ryoko and Tenchi had vanished from the *Ryu-Oh*.

Ayeka’s lips trembled with disbelief at what had happened before her eyes. Then, she set her jaw firmly and called for her guardians in a fierce tone.

"Azaka! Kamidake! Take me to the Main Room immediately!"

"Big Sister! What are you going to do?" Sasami ran over, her face looking as if she were about to cry.

Chapter 7:

"Just Watch Me."

"Just watch me. I’m taking you down to the surface with me!"

Ryoko, back on the bridge of Ryo-Ohki, let out a fierce shout.

"Myaaaaa-n!"

Ryo-Ohki’s spirited cry rang out in response. Tenchi, who had been flattened at Ryoko’s feet during the transition just like before, managed to scramble to his feet and grabbed Ryoko’s arm.

"Taking me down? What do you mean? Are you trying to kill me?!"

"Tenchi, you really are a faint-hearted one, aren't you?"

Ryoko turned and gave Tenchi’s shoulder a few hearty slaps.

"It’ll be fine. Ryo-Ohki and I have survived way worse carnage than this. I could tell you stories for days—slipping through the heavy fire of a massive fleet to snatch treasure, dogfights with the Galaxy Police... The infamous pirate ship Ryo-Ohki and her captain Ryoko are a duo known throughout the universe. Feeling a bit more secure now?"

Ryoko, having regained her energy once back on her own ship, continued chatting away in high spirits.

"Those were the days. The endless universe... freedom to go anywhere, do anything. No one could match the power of Ryo-Ohki and me."

Ryoko paused for a moment to check their distance. Ryo-Ohki, still impaling the *Ryu-Oh*, was rapidly approaching Earth. Tenchi, pale-faced, stared at Ryoko’s profile. He had no idea what was coming next or what would happen to them.

"Hey, Ryoko..." Tenchi spoke up tentatively. "Is it really going to be okay? You're not actually going to crash into the ground, are you? You're definitely going to get me home, right?"

"Home?"

Ryoko turned around with a look as if she were hearing the word for the first time.

"Oh, home. Right. Look."

As Ryoko moved her hands over the console, the floor suddenly became transparent.

"My bad, my bad. I totally forgot I'd sucked it up with space compression."

Beneath Tenchi's feet lay the Masaki household, reduced to a two-dimensional floor plan, with his father, Nobuyuki, stretched out in the yard. Tenchi struck a pose practically identical to *The Scream*, let out a soundless shriek, and collapsed onto the floor.

"Dad... my house..."

"Quit whining. I'll put it back the way it was later."

The floor abruptly returned to normal.

"If all you can do is complain, then shut up. For a man, you really are useless."

Ryoko didn't take her eyes off the instruments. Suddenly, a massive *thud* shook the entire ship.

"Entering the stratosphere. Just watch. You're about to hear something hilarious."

With his mind gone blank, Tenchi watched the revolving lantern of his fifteen years of life flash before his eyes. *Something hilarious? What good is that now? I've never even held a girl's hand. I haven't even been in love yet.*

Love... Come to think of it, when was it that I wished upon a shooting star for a girlfriend? It feels like ages ago...

Having run out of memories for his life-flashing-before-his-eyes moment, Tenchi wandered into the philosophical labyrinth of what "love" actually was. The girl that appeared in Tenchi's heart was beautiful, ethereal, kind, with her eyes peacefully closed, waiting for a prince's kiss. Her shapely chest moved gently up and down, dreaming of a sweet awakening.

Wait... I feel like I've seen that somewhere recently...

"STOOOOOOOP IT!!!"

A voice devoid of any romance pierced Tenchi's ears.

"Ryoko-san!! Please! Slow down! If we keep this up, Ryu-Oh won't hold together! Please, Ryoko-san...!"

That voice? Tenchi snapped his head up. "Ryoko! That was Ayeka-san's voice, wasn't it?"

"Nfuffuffuffuffu..." Ryoko's smirk was her only answer.

"Ryoko-san! Are you listening?! I told you to slow down! Can you hear me?!" Ayeka's desperate voice continued to stream in.

"Nfuffuffuffu, heh-heh-heh-heh..." Ryoko continued to laugh, looking utterly satisfied.

"Ryoko! San! Do you understand what's happening?! Your ship won't come out of this unscathed either! If we crash into the ground like this, both of us might be torn to pieces! Please, say something! At least give me an answer!"

Ayeka's voice was becoming borderline hysterical with terror. Tenchi was aghast. *No way... is she actually planning a double suicide...?*

"Hey, Ryoko! What are you doing?! Are you trying to kill us all? Get away from Ayeka-san's ship right now!" Tenchi grabbed Ryoko's shoulder and yelled at her.

Ryoko stopped smirking instantly and turned back with a terrifying expression.

"This is *my* ship. You think you're in a position to give me orders? If you like that woman so much, go over there. That's fine by me. I don't need anyone here who doesn't trust me."

Tenchi backed away, unable to find another word. *What a personality. I'm not here because I want to be. And for the record, I have no intention of dying with anyone!*

However, Tenchi's mental scream simply echoed in his mind, spinning like a top with nowhere to go. Meanwhile, Ayeka's hysterical voice played on like an endless, intermittent tape.

"Ryoko-san? Are you listening?! Say something! Ryoko-san! Do something! We're going to die! Ryoko-san...!"

Below them, the Seto Ohashi Bridge loomed like in a postcard. *Ah. This is it. It's over.*

The moment he resigned himself to fate, a tremendous shock coursed through his body, and the world began to spin like a special effects shot.

Later, a fisherman who witnessed the moment described it as follows:

"It was like a giant spaceship, or maybe a chestnut burr, falling from the sky. Then, in the next second, it went *skip, skip, skip* across the surface of the sea... (Here, he made a gesture like skipping a stone.) You know what I mean? That's what it was. I've never seen a stone-skip that big in my life. (Well, obviously.) And then? Well, just when I thought it had sunk with a splash, it vanished. The chestnut burr. Can you believe it? Hey, don't publish this. People will think I've gone crazy."

The reporter who interviewed him, of course, did not write the article. Instead, he wrote a piece titled *Giant Meteorite Hits Seto Ohashi Bridge?*, which appeared prominently on the front page of the next morning's newspaper. It noted that since there was almost no traffic, it was fortunate there were no casualties, though repair work was expected to take a considerable amount of time...

7:00 AM the next morning. From inside the two-story house that had suddenly appeared by the pond next to the Masaki Shrine near dawn, the savory smell of

miso soup and rolled omelets wafted out, accompanied by the lively sounds of laughter and conversation.

This was the Masaki house, which was supposed to have been a 2D floor plan due to space compression. In the living room, Tenchi’s father, Nobuyuki, sat with a rice bowl in hand, engrossed in the 7:00 AM news as if nothing had happened.

"Wow. Things sure got flashy out there..."

Nobuyuki shoveled in some rice and sipped his miso soup.

"Tenchi. Aren't you going to eat? This morning’s miso soup is exceptionally good. After all, it’s a collaboration between me and Sasami-chan."

"Yeah, Tenchi. You’re so delicate, it’s a pain. Who cares? Nobody died."

Eating heartily next to Tenchi was Ryoko.

"Exactly. We made it back safe, and we can eat a warm meal like this. I think that’s plenty. I tell you, three cute girls all at once? I was surprised at first, but living with just a father and son is a bit lonely. Well, you know, my philosophy in life is: things will be what they will be. This must be fate."

Having received a general explanation and seemingly accepted it quite quickly, Nobuyuki talked in high spirits as he dug into his second bowl of rice with some pickles.

"But I’m sorry. This wasn't actually where the house was supposed to be, right? Ryo-Ohki just kind of came this way, so there wasn't much we could do."

Picking up a piece of rolled omelet with practiced ease while sitting next to Nobuyuki was Sasami.

"I’m quite confident in my cooking. I’ll do whatever I can to help, so, Uncle, please take care of us."

"It’s fine, it’s fine! Pretty young ladies like you are always welcome!"

Nobuyuki beamed, giving a response like something out of a TV drama.

"You’re so open-minded, Uncle. Sasami is so happy." Sasami smiled like an angel.

"Well, Ryo-Ohki and Ryu are both at the bottom of the pond, and we’ve got nowhere else to go anyway. I’ve got business with Tenchi, and those two are essentially runaways, right? Aside from a certain someone, I think we’ll get along pretty well here."

Ryoko was practical to the end.

"By the way, Tenchi! You okay? Better eat fast or it’ll get cold. Well, with the school trashed like that, you’ll probably have the day off anyway."

Nudged by Ryoko, Tenchi—who was still holding his chopsticks—snapped out of it.

"I... I..."

Words spun wildly in his heart. *How can everyone be talking so calmly? Why is Dad just eating? Our house suddenly appeared at Grandpa’s place—what am I supposed to do now? What about school? What about my studies? And with all these girls around... what on earth am I going to do?!*

Tenchi looked around at this hellish scene of domestic harmony with hollow eyes. Suddenly, he locked eyes with a pair of golden orbs staring intently at him. Ryoko smiled like an angel.

"Tenchi-kun. We’re going to be together forever from today on, aren't we?"

The chopsticks slipped from Tenchi’s hand. Without a word, he stood up like he was on a spring-loaded trigger and bolted without looking back. A sound like someone missing a step halfway up the stairs followed.

"I guess Tenchi-onichan won't play with me today..."

At Sasami’s murmur, Ryoko put down her chopsticks and hurried outside with a strange expression. Soon, an uncontrollable fit of boisterous laughter echoed back.

Nobuyuki, who had finished eating long ago and was watching TV while flipping channels, finally realized why the newspaper hadn't arrived no matter how long he waited.

"Well, maybe I'll make some tea."

"Oh, I'll—"

Sasami started to say, then finally remembered her sister—the "certain someone" Ryoko had mentioned.

"Come to think of it, I wonder if Big Sister is okay."

Sasami looked at the messy dining table, and after a moment's hesitation, grabbed her apron and ran out. "I'll go check on her!"

Nobuyuki smiled as he stacked the rice bowls with practiced movements. "Yeah. She's a really good kid."

A minute later, the sound of running water and a cheerful hum came from the sink.

Meanwhile, outside... Sasami found her sister standing dazed by the edge of the pond.

"Big Sister... I guess the shock was a bit too much after all..."

Ayeka's hair was disheveled, the hem of her kimono was covered in mud, and her shoulders were trembling slightly.

My ship. My ship. My Ryu-Oh. My precious Ryu-Oh.

No matter how many times she repeated it, her thoughts couldn't move past that point. Ayeka wore a cramped smile, unable to move an inch, staring at the water's surface as it rippled in the morning breeze.

And behind Sasami, who was looking worriedly at her sister's back, stood Ryoko with her arms crossed, wearing a smirk that stretched from ear to ear.

Chapter 8:

For the Week That Followed...

For the week that followed, Tenchi and his father, Nobuyuki, were dizzyingly busy with change-of-address notifications, bank account transfers, and various legal procedures.

The only difference from a normal move was that since the house itself had traveled with them, they didn't have to unpack or clean. (By the way, please don't ask trivial questions about how the gas, water, and electricity remained connected. Even the author has things they don't know—I'd rather ask Ryoko myself.)

Nobuyuki, unable to take time off work, began commuting thirty minutes each way to his office in Okayama City as usual. Under the pretext that someone needed to watch the house in his absence, he promptly filed for Tenchi’s temporary leave from school.

Feeling guilty over the recent explosion incident, Tenchi spent his days half-grateful he didn't have to go to school and half-bewildered, making painful efforts to accept this new reality. Specifically, the reality of being surrounded by two aliens—or rather, Juraian royalty—and one "monster woman."

The younger of the two aliens quickly secured her place as Tenchi’s "little sister." By single-handedly taking over cooking, laundry, and cleaning, Sasami seamlessly blended into the Masaki household.

Nobuyuki was delighted to have such powerful help with the chores. Whenever he came home, he’d sit Sasami on his lap and dote on her as if she were his own daughter. In fact, Sasami was clever, attentive, and very practical. She was the one who decided the room assignments for the three "guests" and prepared her sister’s room.

With the help of the two Guardians (who currently stand at the front entrance of the Masaki house acting as gateposts), she rescued closets and dressers from

the *Ryu-Oh* at the bottom of the pond. In just one day, she managed to make the unused eight-mat Japanese-style room on the second floor habitable.

All Tenchi did was carry guest futons and go out to buy initial groceries and daily necessities.

The other guest, Ryoko, had caused a stir by insisting, "I don't need a room, I'm living in Tenchi's!" When she later pointed out that locks didn't matter to her since she could walk through walls anyway, she earned the collective frowns of the household and nearly got kicked out. Following Sasami's persuasion, she eventually settled into the six-mat room next to Ayeka.

As for the final person—Sasami's sister and First Princess of the Juraian royal family, Ayeka—she spent the first few days sitting dazed on the living room sofa, watching Tenchi and Sasami work. Once her room was ready, she entered without a word, slid the fusuma shut, and had Sasami lay out her futon so she could sink into sleep.

A week passed, and a semblance of peaceful daily life returned to the Masaki home.

Every morning, Sasami practiced recipes while watching children's cooking shows. In between, she studied the environment of Earth and Japan, using her natural curiosity to gain knowledge almost equal to Tenchi's. Tenchi, exhausted by her constant questioning, eventually lent her his computer and database and escaped to do field work.

Ryoko, finding herself with time to kill, became obsessed with the computer alongside Sasami. Sasami, in turn, discovered that her "Big Sister Ryoko" wasn't actually that scary and was, in fact, quite a goofball. They became fast friends.

The Masaki household regained order, and the guests adapted to their new lives—save for one certain person.

As for the person who caused Tenchi to get caught up in all this—Tenchi's grandfather and priest of the Masaki Shrine—he was doing just fine. He came over to the Masaki house every day to eat, worked Tenchi like a slave in the fields, teased Ryoko, taught Sasami how to play cat's cradle, drank with Nobuyuki, and went home after gathering his intel. He wasn't the type to be startled by aliens or monster women.

And Ayeka, while these changes occurred, did not step foot outside her eight-mat room. She saw nothing and knew nothing.

Until one day... Ayeka was having a terrible dream.

The beautiful skies of Jurai were burning a reddish-black, and flames were closing in on the Imperial Palace. Floating in the sky like a product of a nightmare was the black silhouette of the evil pirate ship, Ryo-Ohki. Her brother, Yosho, drew the Tenchi-ken and ran off, shaking off Ayeka's hand. A shadow of a woman, dark as the night, descended from Ryo-Ohki to strike him down.

Brother... your crown... Ayeka tried to scream, but no sound came out. *No! That woman is evil. Let the soldiers of the palace fight her. Please, don't leave Ayeka behind...*

It was a dream she had seen over and over. Always the same. Her brother vanished, and she was left alone in the darkness. She remembered every detail, waking up with a scream in the void.

But today's dream was different. In the darkness, far ahead, was a glowing back. *Brother?!* The figure approached rapidly and turned around. It wasn't her brother. It was that boy, Tenchi. He held her brother's sword and was offering it to Ayeka.

Why do you have it...? Before she could ask, Ayeka found herself holding the sword, which had lost its energy and frozen over. The sword transformed into a withered purple flower, lost its shape, and crumbled like sand through her fingers.

Then, she heard the boy's cold, clear voice. *Yosho? He died a long time ago. Those are funeral flowers. The tears of the Royal Family aren't used for celebrations...*

The latter half was her brother's voice. Once, when they were playing and she had woven a wedding crown of white flowers, she had innocently added a purple flower—the same color as his eyes. He had clouded his gentle face for a moment and quietly pulled out that purple flower, known as the "Tears of the Royal Family."

She realized she was standing in a field of purple flowers, with only the ground beneath her feet glowing white. *How ominous...* Ayeka shuddered. *I am standing on a grave. Whose...? Whose?!*

The next moment, Ayeka let out a blood-curdling cry, and the world shattered.

The room was still dark. Her hair was a mess, and though she was pale, her heart was thumping madly. She realized her right hand was numb because she had been gripping the Tenchi-ken so hard her knuckles were white.

Ayeka loosened her grip and buried her face in her pillow. *That's right. That boy returned this sword to me as soon as he got here.*

Calming down slightly, she checked on Sasami, who was breathing softly beside her. *Poor thing, she must be so exhausted she didn't even wake at the sound of my voice...* Ayeka stroked Sasami's hair. *I have put so much burden on you; you must think your sister is pathetic. But my heart and body are so weak, I just can't bring myself to get up. I know you're in the kitchen trying to make me eat. I'm sorry, Sasami... As a successor to the Juraian royal family, I should be stronger...*

Tears tracked down Ayeka's cheeks. *No. If I keep this up, I'll either become too weak to stand or lose my mind.* The pride of the Royal Family finally stirred in her heart. *I must not give in to a foolish heart. It was my own weak, doubting mind that made me see such a dream—the idea that my brother is no longer in this world.*

Ayeka sat up quietly and pushed aside the curtains to look at the dawn garden. Birds were chirping, and the air was soft with mist, casting gentle shadows over the trees and the pond. *Ah... it's different from Jurai, but this planet is so beautiful... If my brother is alive somewhere on this world, then I shall love it too.*

As the morning sun rose, her heart felt lighter. But then, something crossed her field of vision. It was Ryoko. Ryoko glanced back at the house suspiciously, then walked quickly toward the pond.

Ayeka froze. *That's right. That woman is here.* The world once again became a hostile place. *I cannot bear to live in the same house as that woman. Why*

hasn't Lord Tenchi put that monster back in her shrine? I must have Sasami talk to him about it.

Ayeka pictured Tenchi's face. *It must be true that he carries my brother's blood. There is something attractive about that boy. He was polite to me, and the fact that the Tenchi-ken reacted to him is the ultimate proof of his Juraian blood. If I ask him, he might help me search for news of my brother.*

Yes, that's it, Ayeka thought. *First, I must speak to Lord Tenchi and explain everything. No, I must make my feelings known. He is younger than I, but he is a man; surely he will take pity on me and listen to my requests.*

Today, I will greet him properly. With that resolution, she felt relieved and drifted back into a light sleep.

When she woke again, the sun was high. "Big Sister, breakfast!" Sasami entered, carrying a tray and kicking the door open with her foot.

"Sasami! Is that any way to open a door?!" Ayeka sat up, startled.

"Who cares? I'm busy! And it's all because you've been cooped up here and won't help with anything!" Sasami pouted but quickly smiled, set the tray down, and hopped onto Ayeka's lap.

"Big Sister, this isn't Jurai. If you stay here complaining, you'll get old. I've already made friends with everyone. Come downstairs after you eat. It's been a week! Everyone is worried. Tenchi-onichan keeps asking how you are. You don't want them thinking people from Jurai can't even say hello, do you? Please. Today it's just the family and Tenchi-onichan."

Listening to Sasami's non-stop chatter, Ayeka nodded, though she felt the resolution she made before sleeping begin to waver. "I'm sorry, Sasami. Thank you for making breakfast. I'll get ready after I eat. I have things to think about, so come back up later."

For some reason, the moment she heard Tenchi's name, Ayeka turned red and looked away. "What's wrong?" "I'm fine. Just a little dizzy. Now, go on..." Ayeka realized her excuse was poor and fell silent.

Sasami looked at her sister skeptically but decided not to push it. She smiled and left the room. As soon as the door closed, Ayeka ran to the dresser. The reflection showed a haggard, pale face with flushed cheeks, looking like a feverish patient. Ayeka sighed, took a comb, and began to carefully brush her long black hair.

She was truly on the verge of becoming ill. Regretting her escape into her bed, she tidied her hair and began to tend to her nails. *"Tenchi-onichan keeps asking how you are."* Sasami's voice echoed in her head. *So, he was worried about me. Even though I put him through such a painful ordeal.*

A smile played on Ayeka's lips. *I've been so wrapped up in myself that I haven't considered the feelings of the people in this house. I must thank them for taking us in without a word.* She noticed her own smile in the mirror and her expression softened into a shy, girlish look. *I must gain Lord Tenchi's trust. But how? He might think I'm a scary, cold woman. No, he was worried about me, so that can't be it. Or maybe he thinks I'm a rude woman who doesn't know how to say thank you...*

Flustered, Ayeka stood up and began pacing the room. *Silly me. I haven't even greeted him yet, why am I so flustered?* Realizing she was wasting time, she forced herself to eat. As she ate, her heart began to settle. *As the First Princess of Jurai, it is shameful to be this unkempt.* She stood up and began to tidy the room.

By the time Sasami came back, Ayeka was fully prepared, dressed in her formal attire without a single crease, looking more stiff than ever. "Big Sister! You didn't have to be *that* formal."

"I am the First Princess of the Juraian royal family. I cannot present myself before everyone looking unkempt."

"Well, 'everyone' isn't even here right now. That's why I thought it was a good time."

Ayeka felt a bit disappointed inwardly but quickly recovered. "I see. That makes it easier. Let us go, then." She followed Sasami down the stairs, looking incredibly stiff even to an observer.

"Well, well! You haven't come out in so long, I thought you'd passed away!" Ryoko's head popped up from behind the sofa. Ayeka froze halfway down the stairs, her face tightening, but she held her ground.

"Big Sister!" Sasami grabbed her hand and urged her forward.

"I heard you were bedridden with homesickness? Sasami-chan sure has it rough."

"Ryoko-onichan, don't say unnecessary things!" Sasami pulled her sister the rest of the way down and shouted at Ryoko.

"It's quite alright, Sasami. I do not mind her," Ayeka's cold voice cut in. "I have come to greet Lord Tenchi. It has nothing to do with you." Ayeka sat on the sofa, pointedly turning her back to Ryoko.

"Heh, and here I thought I'd show you something interesting!" Ryoko winked at Sasami—who was looking between them with a worried face—and lifted a round object she was holding.

"What's that?" Sasami was instantly intrigued and sat next to Ryoko.

"What does it look like?" Ryoko asked.

"An egg!" Sasami looked down at the thirty-centimeter, mottled, oval object with great interest.

"Correct! Now, what kind of egg do you think it is?"

"Um, an ostrich egg?"

"Wrong! Actually..." Ryoko whispered into Sasami's ear while glancing at Ayeka.

"Whaaat?! Ryoko-onichan's?!" Sasami's eyes went wide.

"It was just born this morning. Isn't it cute?" Ryoko cradled the egg affectionately and rubbed her cheek against it.

"No way! But aren't you single? Who's the father? When did you get married? Are you the kind of person who lays eggs? How? Hey, hey, who's the father?!"

Questions flew like arrows. Ayeka glanced at Sasami. Sasami was snuggled up to Ryoko, curiously stroking the glossy shell. Ayeka's skin crawled.

"What are you doing, Sasami! Do not touch that!"

"But it’s so smooth! It feels good."

"Smooth...?" Ayeka looked between the egg, Sasami, and Ryoko, her mind in a whirl. No matter how much of a monster she was, a humanoid lifeform shouldn't lay eggs. *No, knowing this woman, she might do something that shameless. Is that... really Ryoko’s egg?!*

"What’s going on?" Tenchi peeked into the living room at the noise. He flinched slightly as everyone turned to look at him. His eyes met Ayeka’s.

"Oh... Ayeka-san. Um... are you feeling better now?"

Ayeka reflexively stood up to give her greeting, only to find that the carefully constructed speech she had prepared had vanished like mist. "T-Tenchi-san..." She took a mechanical step forward, then realized she had called him "Tenchi-san"—like a close family member—instead of "Lord" or "Sir," and turned bright red.

"Lord Tenchi..." she corrected herself in a voice like a mosquito’s buzz, clenching her hands tight. "O-On this occasion, for your efforts on behalf of the Juraian royal family, and for your kind assistance to us in our time of hardship, I... I have no words to express my gratitude..."

No, that’s wrong, I must be more princess-like, more elegant! she screamed internally. She looked up and stole a glance at Tenchi. He was just standing there, mouth agape.

"Um... I..." *What should I do? He doesn't seem to understand what I'm saying.* As she looked at Tenchi’s face, she became even more speechless, turning red and looking down like a young schoolgirl. "...Anyway, I offer you my thanks."

"N-No..." Tenchi snapped out of his trance and bowed as well.

The sight of two young people facing each other, both bright red and bowing, is a common sight in hotel lobbies. Usually, however, they have matchmakers or parents nearby.

"Hmph!" A loud snort came from the side. "What a 'lovely' greeting. Tenchi, don't bother with that; come over here! I have something interesting to tell you!"

Ryoko spoke in a tone of blatant contempt, followed by Sasami's cheerful voice. "Big brother, look! This is Ryoko-onichan's egg! She said it was born this morning. Here, look!"

"An egg?" Tenchi turned and saw the egg held importantly in Ryoko's arms. "Ryoko's egg?" As he spoke, a chill ran down Tenchi's spine. He had a very bad feeling about this.

"That's right, Ryoko-onichan laid it. Oh, right! What about the father?"

"Never mind that, don't you want to hear about the egg?" Ryoko ignored Sasami and addressed Ayeka. Ayeka turned her nose up and pointedly ignored both the egg and Ryoko. "I have no desire to speak with you!"

"Heh, that's a shame. And here I was going to tell you about the father. Fine, I'll only tell Sasami-chan. The father is..." Just as Ayeka heard the whisper, *"We aren't married, but..."*

"WHAAAT?! Tenchi-onichan?!"

"W-What? What is it?!" At Sasami's absurd shout, Tenchi grew flustered and backed away. Ayeka turned around, shocked by the sudden development.

"D-a-r-l-i-n-g." Ryoko stood up, still clutching the egg, and leaned suggestively against Tenchi right in front of Ayeka. "Hold it carefully. This is the crystallization of our love. Here you go, Daddy Tenchi."

Ryoko quickly shoved the egg into Tenchi's hands, returned to the sofa, and smiled brightly.

"C-Crystallization?" Poor Tenchi couldn't drop the egg, so he looked down at it in a panic. It certainly looked like an egg. A dinosaur egg, at that.

"Don't be silly, it's a baby, a baby," Ryoko replied with a laugh.

"A-Ayeka-san, this is..." Tenchi looked at Ayeka, pleading for help. *An egg? A baby? What on earth are they talking about?!*

"Stay away from me!" Ayeka's sharp voice cut through. "A baby? How disgusting... You and this woman... you did... *that*?!"

"W-Wait! I didn't do anything! Ryoko is just making things up—"

Ayeka's eyebrows shot up. "Ryoko, is it? You *are* on those terms![1]"

"I'm telling you, no! I don't know anything about this—"

At that moment, the egg gave a violent rattle. "Whoa!" Tenchi almost dropped it.

Suddenly, the shell burst open, and a furry animal's leg popped out. "UGYAAAAAAAAAH!"

Tenchi impulsively tossed the egg aside, and it hit the floor with a dull thud.

"Ah!" Sasami rushed forward to save it, but froze just inches away.

It's hatching! But what on earth is inside?

The creature that crawled out of the shell waddled unsteadily, tripped over its own long ears, and let out a pitiful cry.

"Myaaa-nnn..."

Myaaa? Tenchi leaned down to look at what he had just thrown, nearly bumping heads with Sasami, who was peeking in as well.

The creature was grayish-brown with long ears and large hind legs. It had a round tail and white paws. It looked like a cross between a cat and a rabbit—a "cat-rabbit." In the center of its forehead was a slit housing a gem that sparkled like a ruby.

"What is this? It's soooooo cute!" Sasami whispered, her nose almost touching the newborn. "Can't you see yet? What's your name?"

The creature opened its eyes and pricked up its ears in surprise at Sasami.

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[1] Tenchi doesn't use honorifics with Ryoko's name, this implies the level of familiarity of one's wife in Japanese.

"Yellow eyes!" Sasami shouted excitedly.

"It’s Ryo-Ohki," Ryoko said. "That’s why it has golden eyes, just like mine."

"Ryo-Ohki?!" Sasami turned around. "Is this the spaceship’s child?"

"Yeah. Since she was completely trashed, she was regenerating."

"No way... this little thing?" Sasami tentatively reached out a hand to the cat-rabbit, which was looking up at the large humans with a blank stare. Ryo-Ohki gave her hand a big lick.

"Aw! It licked me! Look, it licked me!"

Ryoko let out a delighted laugh and scooped Ryo-Ohki up. "I think she likes you, Sasami-chan. You’ve got the same shaped head, so she probably thinks you're one of her own kind."

"Eh?"

Ryoko pointed at Sasami’s hair, which was tied up high in two bunches.

"Oh! She thought these were ears! Hey, can I hold her? Just for a bit. Please!"

"Don't drop her." As she handed Ryo-Ohki to Sasami, Ryoko slowly turned her gaze toward Ayeka, who was still frozen in place.

"So, there you have it. You’d have to be crazy to believe this was a human baby, wouldn't you?" Smirking as if to say *'See, you sheltered little princess?'*, Ryoko turned to the equally frozen Tenchi and wrapped her arms around his. "Well, though it *might* happen eventually."

That was the breaking point. Ayeka’s lips trembled, and she finally forced her voice out.

"How cruel... You were all making a fool of me. Lord Tenchi... I thought you, at least... were a sincere person..." Tears welled in Ayeka’s eyes. "Enough! I've had enough!"

Ayeka bolted. A startled Tenchi shook off Ryoko’s arms and caught Ayeka just before she reached the door.

"Wait! It's a misunderstanding!"

"Let go of me! You insolent man!"

SLAP!

The sound was so loud it made Sasami jump. Ayeka, having impulsively slapped Tenchi, gave him a look of intense, fleeting sorrow before turning on her heel and running out.

"Ahaha! Well, that’s a bit of my grudge settled," Ryoko laughed, flopping onto the sofa. "I didn't think she’d actually believe it! Man, that went perfectly."

"I know, right? I thought it was weird too." Sasami nuzzled Ryo-Ohki, looking into the golden eyes. "Right, Ryo-Ohki? You don't look anything like your 'daddy' anyway."

Tenchi stood there stunned, clutching his stinging cheek, but suddenly, he felt a surge of anger.

"Hey, Ryoko!" He marched over, grabbed her by the collar, and pulled her up. "Why do you always, *always* do things to put me in a corner?! What did I ever do to you? Why can't you just stay quiet and peaceful? And Ayeka-san... that was uncalled for! Why do you have to treat her like an enemy?!"

"Uncalled for?" Anger flashed in Ryoko’s eyes, but she suddenly seemed to think of something. Her eyes grew moist, and she collapsed into a theatrical sob. "I’m the one who's pitiful! I thought I could finally live freely, but then she follows me all the way here... I waited seven hundred years! I thought I was going to have a fun time with you forever, and then that woman comes and ruins everything! Do you have any idea how I feel...?"

As she spoke, she clung to Tenchi, subtly feeling around for something.

"Ryoko?"

"Yes, Tenchi?" she replied with a meltingly sweet voice.

"If you're looking for the Tenchi-ken, I don't have it."

Ryoko’s hands stopped instantly. "What does that mean?"

"I gave it back to Ayeka-san. It belongs to the Juraian royal family, doesn't it?"

"You gave it back?!" Ryoko gripped his collar tight, glaring as if she were about to bite his head off. "Why would you give it to someone like her?! All of my energy is in that—"

She suddenly let go, staring at Tenchi with a look of disbelief, and stumbled backward.

"Whoops."

Someone caught her from behind. Startled, Ryoko's body went stiff.

"That makes two today. Quite a lucky day for me."

"Grandpa! When did you get here?"

Katsuhito smiled, still holding Ryoko around the waist. "When will you learn to read my presence? I've been listening the whole time. Quite entertaining, I must say."

Ryoko, finally coming to her senses, spun around. "How long are you going to keep touching me?!"

She threw a punch, but in a blur of motion, Katsuhito parried it effortlessly, sending her stumbling.

How?! she thought. *This old man... blocked my punch?!*

"So, this is your 'child,' then? Quite cute." Katsuhito slipped past the stunned Ryoko and Tenchi and patted Ryo-Ohki on the head. "Even I didn't know a human could give birth to a cat-rabbit."

"No, Grandpa, you've got it wrong!" Sasami corrected him with a laugh. "This is Ryo-Ohki. I don't quite get it either, but the broken Ryo-Ohki regenerated."

"It's fine, it's fine. Logic doesn't matter much." Katsuhito picked up Ryo-Ohki. "The world is full of wonders that human strength can't account for. I don't care if it's Ryoko's child or a spaceship's child."

Ryo-Ohki sat quietly in Katsuhito's hands, looking up at his face without a sound. Sasami felt a strange sensation.

"Grandpa... did you know about Ryo-Ohki?"

"I heard it just now."

"No, I mean..." Sasami hesitated. "It’s like you know everything. When we fell from the sky, you weren't even surprised. And sometimes your eyes look like a different color... a beautiful purple. Grandpa, are you really from Earth?"

Katsuhito let out a laugh and handed Ryo-Ohki back to Sasami. "It’s Sasami-chan who knows everything. I’m just Tenchi’s grandpa, a simple priest. But there is one thing Sasami-chan doesn't know."

Sasami’s eyes went wide. "What, Grandpa?"

Katsuhito whispered into her ear. "Which one does Tenchi like more—Ayeka-oneesama or Ryoko-oneesama?"

"Stop it!" Sasami giggled, but unfortunately, Tenchi overheard.

"What are you saying?!" Tenchi was genuinely annoyed and turned to leave the room. "Just leave me out of it!"

"You might feel that way, but they certainly don't," Katsuhito teased. "Tenchi! Don't forget your training this afternoon!"

The door slammed shut in response.

"He’s just like his mother. Whenever I teased her, she’d get serious and angry too." Katsuhito looked at the door with nostalgia. "Tenchi takes after her..."

"His mother?"

"Her name was Achika. She’s no longer in this world."

"She... died?" Sasami covered her mouth. "I'm sorry. She passed away?"

"Yes. Now, come to the kitchen. Sasami-chan is the little mother of this house. Before training, let me tell you about the Masaki family."

As Katsuhito and Sasami headed to the kitchen, Ryoko was left alone in the living room.

"I don't like this," she muttered, staring at the doorway. "Who is that old man?"

Ryoko had no way of knowing then, but the day the terrifying secret would be revealed was coming. But that day was not today.

Feeling irritated, she sighed and looked around. "Where did that brat Ayeka go?" Ryoko had been so focused on Ryo-Ohki's regeneration she had nearly forgotten her original goal: getting the Tenchi-ken back.

"If she's not in her room, she's outside."

Ryoko started to tiptoe up the stairs, then stopped herself with a self-mocking laugh. *I'm getting too used to life here. I could just teleport*.

Wait, what did that old man mean by 'the second one today'? She remembered Katsuhito catching her. *The first one must have been Ayeka!* Realizing the old man had treated both her and Ayeka like mere children, she punched the banister in a fit of pique. The wood shattered into splinters.

"Making a fool of me...!"

Ryoko vanished. Sasami, startled by the noise, poked her head out of the kitchen and looked around.

"Ryoko-oneechan? Wait, where's Ryo-Ohki?" She saw the broken banister and sighed. "Seriously. Am I the only one who cares about this house or worries about dinner?"

Sasami decided to leave the broken railing to the person who broke it and went back to the kitchen to hear the rest of Katsuhito's story.

Meanwhile, a heartbroken Ayeka was climbing the stone steps to the Masaki Shrine, replaying the morning's events.

When she had run out of the living room, she had collided head-on with Katsuhito. In her state of distress, she could barely apologize, but in that split second, she saw something unbelievable.

"What's the matter, young lady?" the grandfather had asked.

For just a moment, his eyes had appeared purple. Not black, but a deep violet...

Lord Tenchi's are black. His father's are dark brown. Why did only the grandfather's eyes look violet? It was the exact same color as her brother Yosho's eyes.

Could he really be related to Brother Yosho...?

As she climbed the long staircase, a light pitter-patter followed her. It was Ryo-Ohki. No matter how many times she tried to shoo it away, the creature kept following. And every time it did, Ayeka was reminded of everything that had happened in the living room.

"Go away!" she finally shouted. "Don't follow me! I hate you!"

Ryo-Ohki let out a startled "Myah!" and dove into the bushes, peeking out with frightened, troubled eyes. Seeing that face, Ayeka felt a wave of self-loathing.

What am I doing, screaming at such a tiny creature? It's just a newborn, innocent animal.

"I'm the one who wants to cry," Ayeka muttered, turning away.

Just then, she saw something violet swaying near Ryo-Ohki.

"The Tears of the Royal Family?!"

Those funeral flowers? No, it was just a nameless Earth flower swaying in the breeze. Ayeka knelt down and began plucking the flowers.

"Brother..."

She tore the petals apart, picked up more, and brushed the thin petals from her lap. Before she knew it, every flower in the patch lay scattered on the ground. Her vision blurred.

"Brother...!" Ayeka covered her face with both hands and sobbed. Her heart was overflowing with words she couldn't speak, yet the tears kept coming.

What should I do? She knew no one would answer, but she had to ask. *What am I supposed to do now? If Brother is really... not alive anymore...* She was too terrified to finish the thought. *I should have stayed on Jurai. Even without this*

pain, there were so many people there who cherished me. Father Azusa, Mother Misaki... I am a foolish daughter. I don't have the strength to live with this sadness anymore...

Suddenly, a red flower was held out in front of her.

"Who's there?" Ayeka gasped in surprise. "Oh... you..."

Ryo-Ohki was standing on its hind legs, holding a flower in its mouth. Ayeka took the swaying flower.

"For me...?"

"Myah." Ryo-Ohki tilted its head and sat down properly, looking up at her.

"You're giving this to me?"

Ryo-Ohki put its front paws on Ayeka's lap and gave a gentle scratch.

"Oh, that tickles."

Ayeka scooped Ryo-Ohki into her lap and stroked the soft fur. The ice around her heart began to melt. "You're a kind little thing."

For the first time since arriving on Earth, a gentle smile worthy of a princess appeared on her lips. "Ryo-Ohki, is it? You were worried about me and came to comfort me. Such a sweet child..."

Ryo-Ohki arched its back happily and nuzzled Ayeka's hand.

How strange... Ayeka thought. *This little creature born from a woman I despise so much is the one melting my heart. Is this what life is? Perhaps I was too selfish and forgot how to receive small gifts.*

She looked down at the creature with a newfound tenderness. "I'm sorry for all that crying and shouting." She thought of Tenchi's stunned face and felt a pang of shame. "I have to apologize to Lord Tenchi..."

Suddenly, Ryo-Ohki's ears perked up.

"What is it?"

Ryo-Ohki hopped down and bolted up the stone steps.

"Where are you going? Wait!" Ayeka scrambled to her feet. She heard a sound—like wood striking wood.

She chased after Ryo-Ohki, desperate not to lose sight of it. "Ryo-Ohki-chan, where are you?"

She pushed through a thicket, and the view suddenly opened up. In a circular clearing in the woods, the sound of striking wood was echoing. Tenchi and his grandfather stood in the center with wooden swords, facing each other in training.

"Lord Tenchi..." Ayeka whispered, peeking from the shadows.

The two were sparring intensely, but even to Ayeka's eyes, the difference in skill was obvious. The grandfather hadn't broken a sweat, while Tenchi was drenched and panting.

Ayeka smiled. She was used to watching her brother train. *I wonder how they'd fare against the Imperial soldiers. Lord Tenchi has speed, but he still lacks power...*

"Alright, let's try the basic forms," Katsuhito said.

Basic forms? Ayeka, who enjoyed martial arts herself, was curious about Earth's styles. Tenchi and his grandfather faced each other, resting their wooden swords on their shoulders.

"Wait... that's the same stance as the Kou-ou-ken!"

As she watched, they began a sequence of movements. They shifted positions with fluid grace, clashing blades and separating in a rhythmic cycle of offense and defense.

Ayeka felt a shock that took her breath away.

It was identical. To her brother's style. No—it was the very essence of it.

"That... that habit of turning the wrist..."

Tenchi’s movements, while less refined, were a direct copy of his grandfather’s. And the grandfather’s style was an exact match for the unique forms her brother Yosho excelled at.

"No... it can't be..."

Ayeka leaned forward. At that moment—

"KYAAAAA!"

Before she knew what was happening, Ayeka tumbled down the embankment she had been standing on.

"A-Ayeka-san?!"

"Ow..."

Tenchi rushed over. "What are you doing here? Are you okay?"

Ayeka grimaced in pain, holding her ankle. Her face burned with embarrassment. "I-I am fine. I apologize for disturbing your practice. I will leave at once."

I'm being punished for eavesdropping, she thought. She tried to stand, but a sharp pain shot through her left ankle. She groaned and sank back down.

What am I doing? She felt like crying from the sheer humiliation. Tenchi knelt beside her, looking worried but unsure if he should reach out.

The moment Ayeka saw Tenchi’s face, she became speechless. Everything—the training she had just witnessed, the apology she had finally resolved to give—swirled in her mind.

As Tenchi looked down at her with worried, furrowed brows, he appeared strikingly masculine. For a fleeting second, she saw the silhouette of her brother, Yosho, in him.

He truly does carry my brother's blood... Meeting him must be the work of destiny.

The similarity in his swordsmanship wasn't a coincidence. Neither was his grandfather. Her brother must have married an Earth woman, and his descendants had preserved the techniques of the *Kou-ou-ken*...

While Ayeka stared at Tenchi with these thoughts, Tenchi was thinking something entirely different.

She is so incredibly feminine, was his honest impression.

Ayeka was pale, her clothes were stained with mud, and blood seeped from her ankle. But because of this, the stiff mask she usually wore had vanished. She looked like a wounded bird—an endearing sight that would make any man want to protect her. She was a type of girl he had never met among his classmates.

She's beautiful... Tenchi whispered in his heart.

In that moment, he didn't care if she was an alien. If such a beautiful person could love him, he felt he would risk his life to protect her. It was a classic "boy meets girl" moment. Had they been alone, the story might have progressed rapidly in a different direction.

Unfortunately, Katsuhito arrived.

"Young lady, what happened?" Without waiting for an answer, Katsuhito began examining her injured foot. "Hmm. Doesn't look broken, but it's a nasty sprain. You shouldn't walk on it today. Tenchi."

Katsuhito turned to his grandson. "Carry this young lady on your back. When you get home, tend to the sprain. I'll be heading back to the shrine." He tied his hand towel around her bleeding foot and stood up.

"Um..." Ayeka called out. "Thank you for your kindness. But that training just now... what form was it? It looked familiar. Who taught it to you?"

Katsuhito looked down at Ayeka in silence, then suddenly glanced at the sky. "It looks like rain. You'd better hurry." For an instant, a pained expression flickered across his face. He turned and began walking up the mountain path.

"Wait! Did I say something rude...?" Ayeka called after his receding back, a sense of unease rising in her chest.

Katsuhito stopped and looked back briefly. "September rain is cold. Hurry now." Without another word, he walked away.

By the time they started down the path, the rain was coming down in earnest.

"Damn. Grandpa was right," Tenchi muttered. Carrying Ayeka, he broke into a jog and ducked into a side path toward a shelter. "Ayeka-san, are you okay?" he called back to the trembling girl on his shoulders. "We're going to a mountain hut. It's more like a storage shed, but we need to get out of this rain."

"I am sorry..." Ayeka whispered. Between the pain in her foot and the damp cold, she was shivering uncontrollably. "Because of me..."

Tenchi didn't answer; he was too out of breath to speak. Finally reaching the hut, he set Ayeka down on a wooden bench. He pulled off his wet shirt and began drying himself off.

"Ayeka-san, you should probably take off those wet clothes and dry them too." Tenchi started a fire in a drum can, wrung out his wet training gear, and hung it up. Soon, the fire was roaring cheerfully. "Ayeka-san?"

Seeing Ayeka still sitting on the bench, clutching her chest and shivering, Tenchi handed her a few hand towels. Ayeka took them with a troubled expression, blushing and looking down.

Tenchi stood there for a moment before the realization hit him like a lightning bolt. *I'm an idiot! I'm telling her to undress right in front of me?!*

Turning bright red, he stammered, "U-Um, I'll... I'll wait outside. Call me if you need anything!" He rushed out and shut the door.

Inside, the hut grew dim again. Feeling both relieved and guilty, Ayeka removed her wet outer kimono, remaining in her thin under-robe (*hadajuban*), and began drying her hair. As her body warmed up, she felt better.

"Lord Tenchi..." she smiled, remembering his panicked exit. "Men can be so dense. But he is kind. Strong and polite, too."

She wondered if he was cold outside, but she lacked the courage to call him back in. The thought of being alone with him in this state made her heart race. Suddenly, a rustle came from the shadows.

"Who's there?"

The corner of the hut was pitch black. Another sound—the sound of something moving. An animal? Shuddering, she instinctively moved closer to the fire. Suddenly, something heavy collapsed, and a furry mass flew at her face.

"KYAAAAA!!"

A piercing scream echoed from the hut. *Ayeka-san!* Tenchi burst through the door and collided with Ayeka as she ran out. "Something... something flew at my face!" she cried, clinging to him.

"Something? A marten? A weasel?" Tenchi looked into the dark hut, on guard. Then, a frightened cry came from the shadows.

"Mya... myah..."

"Ryo-Ohki?"

The creature emerged, tilting its head and looking up at Tenchi with a troubled face. Tenchi nearly burst out laughing with relief. "Ayeka-san, it’s okay. It looks like this little one was hiding in here."

Ayeka peeked back and saw the tiny creature sitting on the dirt floor. "Oh... you scared me half to death. You really are a naughty child."

Tenchi and Ayeka remained in each other's arms for a moment, watching Ryo-Ohki groom itself. *I'm so glad Lord Tenchi was here...* Ayeka felt a melting sense of relief in his embrace.

"Are you okay?" "E-Eh? Yes..."

Only then did she realize she was clinging to a half-naked Tenchi. "I-I am so sorry! To show you such an embarrassing sight..." She blushed and clutched the front of her robe.

"Right, I’ll... go back outside then." Tenchi awkwardly moved toward the door. It was still pouring.

"Wait!" Ayeka called out. "Please... stay here by the fire. It’s cold outside, isn't it?"

Tenchi turned back, surprised. He looked at the alien princess. Her wet hair was starting to dry, her cheeks were flushed, and her eyes sparkled in the firelight. He felt a surge of gratitude toward whatever god had sent the rain.

"...Yeah."

It was a blunt response. Cursing his inability to say anything clever, Tenchi sat on the bench a short distance from her. "Sorry," he added lamely. Ayeka gave him a gentle smile.

"My home planet is called Jurai," Ayeka began, staring into the flames.

She told him of her father, her mother, Sasami, and her brother Yosho. She described the Imperial Palace, the people, the nature of Jurai, and its changing seasons. Tenchi listened in awe.

"My brother..." she paused, her voice full of nostalgia. "...was a master of the *Kou-ou-ken*, a martial art passed down through the Juraian royal family. Every royal has their own personal weapon—a symbol of their contract with their ship. For example..."

Ayeka removed the tiara from her brow. "This is my key and my weapon. It allows me to pilot the *Ryu-Oh* and communicate my will. If I focus, it can take the shape of a spear." In her hand, the tiara transformed into a hilt similar to the Tenchi-ken before reverting.

Then, she pulled the Tenchi-ken from her robes. "This is the symbol of the contract between my brother and his ship, *Funaho*. Usually, a ship and its key share a name, but my brother named his ship after his mother, so he chose a different name for the key. Since his mother was from Earth, perhaps she was the one who named the sword *Tenchi*."

"Wait," Tenchi interrupted. "Your mother and his mother are different people?"

Ayeka smiled. "Jurai customs are different. A Jurai Emperor may take two wives. Since we often marry within the clan, we introduce blood from other planets to keep the lineage strong. My brother's mother, Lady Funaho, was

brought from Japan. I only know the basics about Earth, but my brother heard much from his mother. So, you could say this is his home, too."

She looked down sadly. "If my brother threw away his life on Jurai to choose Earth, then my search is in vain. But..." her voice trembled. "I am his fiancée. It was decided by our father when I was very young, but even so... I loved him."

Silence fell. Tenchi wanted to say something, but anything he thought of felt hollow. *So Ayeka-san has been traveling the universe for seven hundred years looking for her fiancé? To me, Yosho is a legend, but to her, he's her brother and the person she loves. And this journey was meant to help her accept his death...*

Seeing Tenchi's conflict, Ayeka looked up. "I'm sorry. There is no use telling you all this." She blinked back tears. "Lord Tenchi... what should I do? The *Ryu-Oh* is at the bottom of the pond and will take years to regenerate. I have no idea where my brother is, Sasami followed me here, and I have nowhere else to go."

New tears rolled down her cheeks.

"Ayeka-san!" Tenchi said urgently. "Stay with me. I might not be much help in finding your brother, but I can play with Sasami-chan. Our house has plenty of rooms, and honestly, you guys have been helping us more than the other way around. It's totally fine. I... I'd prefer it if you stayed..."

Tenchi lowered his gaze. "It makes me happy to have you here. Because I..."

Because... what? Ayeka looked up, startled.

"No, never mind," Tenchi caught himself, remembering her brother. "Let's find him. If we look through Grandpa's old documents, we might find a clue."

"I see... Yes, you're right..." Ayeka was barely listening to the end of his sentence. *What was he going to say?* "Lord Tenchi... I wanted to ask..."

Their eyes met. For a moment, the world faded away. Ayeka's hand hesitated, then reached out to cover Tenchi's.

"MYAU, MYAU!"

A sharp cry broke the spell. Ayeka pulled her hand back as Ryo-Ohki appeared at Tenchi’s feet, clutching a carrot leaf in its mouth.

"What is it, you?" Tenchi muttered, inwardly disappointed. "Why the carrot?"

"Myah." Ryo-Ohki pinned the carrot down with a paw and sniffed it.

"You want to eat that?" "Myan!"

Tenchi laughed and dangled the carrot. Ryo-Ohki lunged like a cat after a fish and began munching away. "Carrots, huh? I was wondering what you ate. I'm glad we found something."

Tenchi stood up and opened the door. The rain had stopped, and the air smelled of wet earth. "Shall we? Sasami-chan must be worried."

"Myau!" Ryo-Ohki protested. Ayeka laughed and patted its head. "It's okay, Ryo-Ohki-chan. We won't leave you."

Ryo-Ohki dashed to the back of the hut and dragged out a basket of carrots. "Oh, you were worried about the rest of them? Don't worry, I'll have Sasami come get them later."

Tenchi picked up the basket. "You're carrying these yourself. I have to carry Ayeka-san." He rigged a makeshift strap for the creature to wear the basket. Looking at Ryo-Ohki as a "backpacking" cat-rabbit, Tenchi and Ayeka burst into laughter.

"We're almost home," Tenchi said.

"What is that...?" Ayeka pointed to a massive tree growing by the pond.

"Oh, that? It’s the Sacred Tree of the Masaki Shrine. Most people don't know about it because it’s not on the main grounds, but they used to pray to it for rain. Want to see it?"

As they got closer, the tree's majesty became clear. Ayeka looked up in disbelief. Though weathered by Earth’s storms and its trunk roughened by age, the streamlined shape of the leaves was unmistakable.

This is Funaho!

Ayeka slid off Tenchi's back and tentatively touched the trunk with the Tenchi-ken. From within, she felt a distinct, powerful heartbeat.

"Lord Tenchi!"

Ayeka cried out, her voice filled with a mix of shock and pure joy.

"It's alive! *Funaho* is alive!"

Tenchi looked up at the Sacred Tree, bewildered. "Funaho...?"

"My brother's ship. This is the ship's brain—its core!" Ayeka threw her arms around the massive trunk, pressing her cheek against the bark as if embracing a long-lost friend.

"Lord Tenchi, come here..." After a moment of peaceful silence, she beckoned him with a whisper. "Take my hand."

The moment Tenchi's fingers met hers, the world dissolved.

With a roar that shook the heavens, the two of them were suddenly falling through the sky at terminal velocity, hurtling toward the pond below. Tenchi let out a scream and squeezed his eyes shut.

"It's alright. Do not let go of my hand," Ayeka's voice drifted to him, clear as a bell despite the howling wind. "This is the ship's memory. We are inside its records."

"The ship's memory?"

"Yes. For you, Lord Tenchi, these are events from seven hundred years ago."

A blinding flash followed a thunderous impact, and the scenery shifted. They were standing at the edge of a massive, crater-like basin. In the center stood a dignified young man with a sword in his hand.

"Brother!" Ayeka hissed.

The young man—Yosho—was locked in a life-or-death struggle with a woman whose face was twisted into a mask of malice.

"Ryoko!!" Tenchi gasped.

It was a Ryoko he didn't recognize. Her eyes were golden and predatory, her mouth pulled back in a demonic snarl. She swung a glowing blue blade, clashing violently with Yosho. But every time she struck, a translucent shield manifested before Yosho, parrying her every move.

"What is that...?"

"The *Kou-ou-yoku* (Light Hawk Wings)," Ayeka said proudly. "The ultimate mystery of the Juraian royal family. A shield of light that no blade or attack can pierce. Usually, it is a ship's defense, but only a select few in our lineage can manifest it through swordsmanship. My brother and my father, the Emperor, were the most renowned masters of this art."

Tenchi watched, awestruck. Yosho was fast—faster and more skilled than even his grandfather. With a single, decisive stroke, Yosho knocked the sword from Ryoko's hand and slashed across her chest. She let out a horrific shriek and collapsed, motionless.

"Did he kill her?"

"No," Ayeka replied. "You know that isn't true, Lord Tenchi. Look."

Yosho knelt by Ryoko, holding his sword in a reverse grip as if to deliver a finishing blow. But he hesitated. He closed his eyes, and a pale blue energy began to flow from Ryoko's forehead and wrists, being absorbed into the hilt of the Tenchi-ken.

"The gems!" Tenchi shouted as three red flames ignited on the sword's hilt.

"Yes. That is Ryoko’s energy," Ayeka explained. "No matter how evil she was, my brother could not bring himself to kill one who wore the form of a woman. Whether it was a blessing or a curse for her, she was sealed away to sleep for seven hundred years."

The silhouette of Yosho stood tall against the fading light of the setting sun. Then, darkness swallowed everything.

When Tenchi opened his eyes, he was back by the Sacred Tree. The afternoon sun was dazzling.

"My brother is alive," Ayeka said firmly, her eyes shimmering. "Funaho lives. The memory ends here, but if my brother had perished, Funaho would have withered away long ago."

She stepped back from the tree and held out the Tenchi-ken. "I am returning this to you. This sword was passed down through time from my brother to you. You have been recognized as one worthy of the contract. Until the day my brother is found... will you protect us?"

Tenchi scratched his head, feeling small. "I'm... I'm not really that kind of guy. I don't even know how to use it right. You saw me earlier; I'm weaker than my grandpa."

Ayeka simply smiled. "The day will come when you are worthy of that blade. I believe in you."

Tenchi took the sword in silence. It felt unusually right in his hand, still holding the warmth of Ayeka's touch. A sudden, fierce desire surged within him.

I want to be stronger. I want to earn Ayeka-san's respect, just like Yosho did in those memories. I want to protect her.

It was the resolve of a fifteen-year-old boy experiencing love for the first time. In that moment, Tenchi ceased to be a mere guide; he became a knight.

Watching from a distance, Katsuhito smiled. "Ho... so he has finally claimed his sword."

He watched the two young people standing under the Sacred Tree. "It is for the best. It will take time to master, but a contract is something that tempers the soul. Keep practicing, Tenchi."

His gaze lingered on Ayeka for a moment, filled with a deep, unreadable nostalgia.

"Ayeka..." he whispered into the wind. "...forgive me."

He turned and vanished into the mountain path without a sound. Moments later, Sasami’s voice drifted through the air.

"Sister! So this is where you were! I was worried... Ah, wait, Ryo-Ohki!"

Ryoko’s grumpy voice followed. "Hmph. Look at them, all cozy by themselves. And here I was, coming to 'rescue' you. I should've stayed in bed."

"You came to rescue us?!" Tenchi shouted in disbelief.

"What, is it a crime for me to come get you? Fine! Stay here then!"

"Ryoko! Wait!" Ayeka protested. "We were having a very important conversation! Besides, I'm injured..."

"Injured?! Sister, are you okay?"

The voices faded into a chaotic jumble of bickering and laughter. Katsuhito, walking up the path, let a smile play on his lips.

I put you through a lot of loneliness, Tenchi. But I think this makes up for it—with interest.

Up in the heavens, he imagined Achika was laughing too.

[Tenchi Muyo! Ryo-Ohki: The Impermanence of All Things (Part 1) — END]

Afterword

I have kept you waiting for a long time. I now present to you the second volume of Tenchi Muyo! Ryo-Ohki.[2]

In the outside world, things seem to have reached a state that is either wonderful or terrifying: the special episode "The Night Before the Carnival" is out, the spin-off "Galaxy Police Mihoshi's Unbelievable Space Adventure" has been released, two CDs are out, and a manga is currently being serialized.

As for what the author was doing during all that time... it's not that I was napping on the guest sofa, but various things happened. To put it simply, I was stuck in a "Murphy" state.

By Murphy, I mean the famous "Murphy's Law." Things like "Objects will immediately pile up on any flat surface," or "The taxi you're waiting for will never come"—wait, is it "A watched pot never boils"? Anyway, that's why I ended up being so terribly late.

What? You don't get it at all? I knooow. It's aaaall my fault. I'm just a clumsy, slow-poke turtle, but I was still doing my beeest for the sake of peace in the universe...

My apologies. I suddenly started channeling Mihoshi there.

You can think of this particular story as a novelization of the main series. This book is like a tapestry, woven to fill in the gaps between the points of a story that progresses at an accelerating pace.

The world of Tenchi has many "missing links," and as the world expands, more "Whys?" and "Hows?" tend to pop up. As you know, the Tenchi world is a work created by many people, and it seems everyone (the author included) has their own way of connecting those links.

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[2] Canonical chronologically this is the first but release chronologically its the second novel released this translation treats it as the first

You could perhaps call it the Tenchi Parallel World.

But within it, there is Tenchi-kun, Ryoko, Ayeka, and the people surrounding Tenchi—and you and I are there too. That is what's important. That is all that matters. Yes, having acquaintances in space and having monsters for friends. Don't you think that's... "Love"?

Tenchi is a "space-friendly" story that connects the stars with an aura of love. Every work created so far becomes a star, forming the Tenchi constellation. And the ones making that constellation shine are, of course, all of you readers—it's your love!

By the way, I have a feeling this Tenchi world is going to keep expanding... For those who attended the spring event, you probably know there's talk of a TV adaptation, more CDs coming out, merchandise being released, and all sorts of other things.

Speaking of which, I was a bit surprised to see cosplayers at the event venue. Since Azaka and Kamidake were there, I'm ashamed to admit it took me a moment to realize what I was looking at before it finally clicked—"Ah, I see!" Yes, that was me wandering around the venue with a child in tow. I hope to see you all again.

*I personally hope this story continues for a long, long time—until Tenchi-kun marries **** (I wonder who that will be? Even the author doesn't know yet) and has a child...*

Wait, this is no time for such easygoing talk. To Mr. Moriyama of the Dragon Magazine editorial department: I have caused you a great deal of trouble yet again. I'm sorry! It's aaaall my fault.

Anyway, I shall see you again in the second volume (Part 2). Please. Just wait for me patiently!

- Naoko Hasegawa